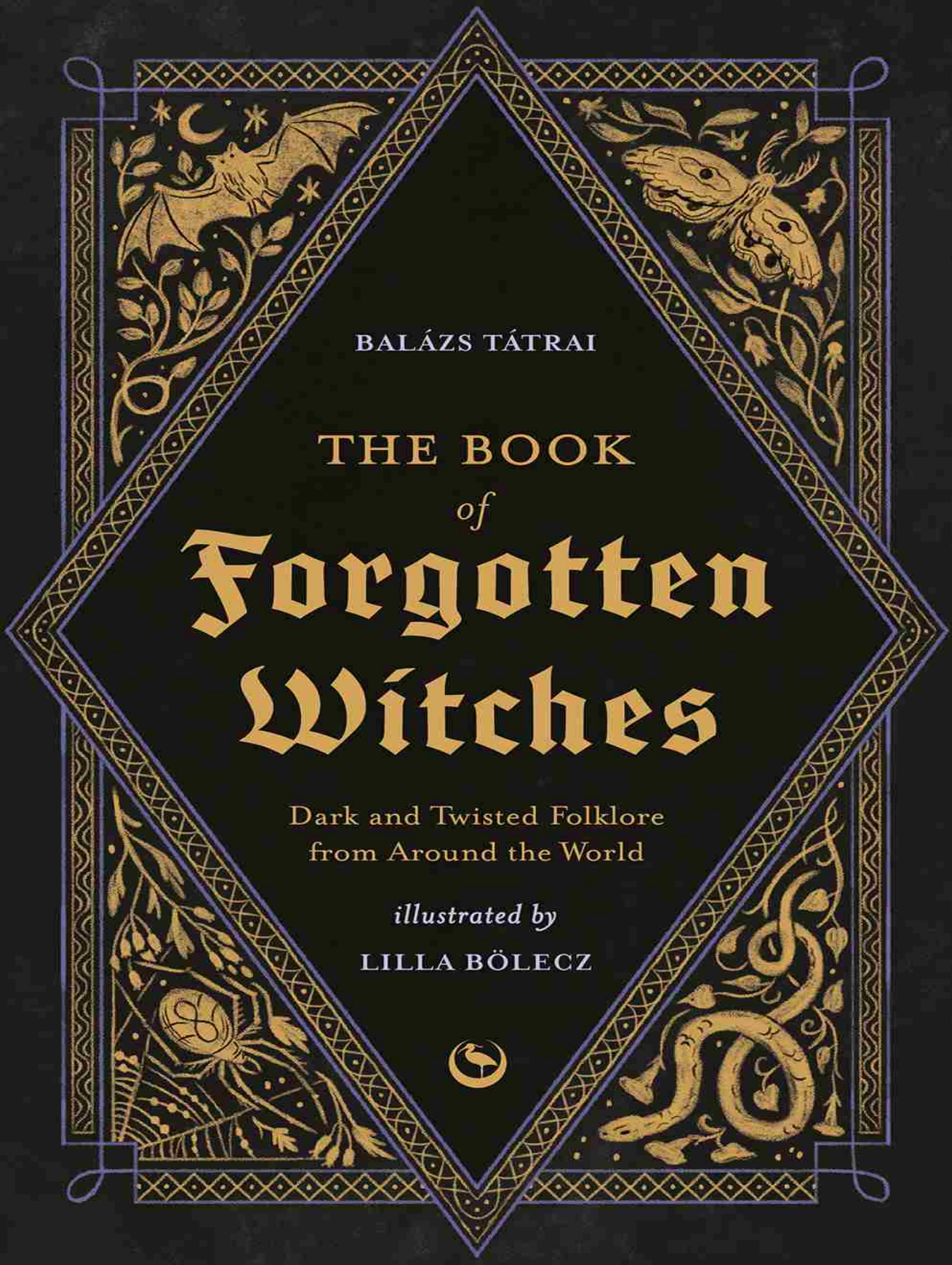


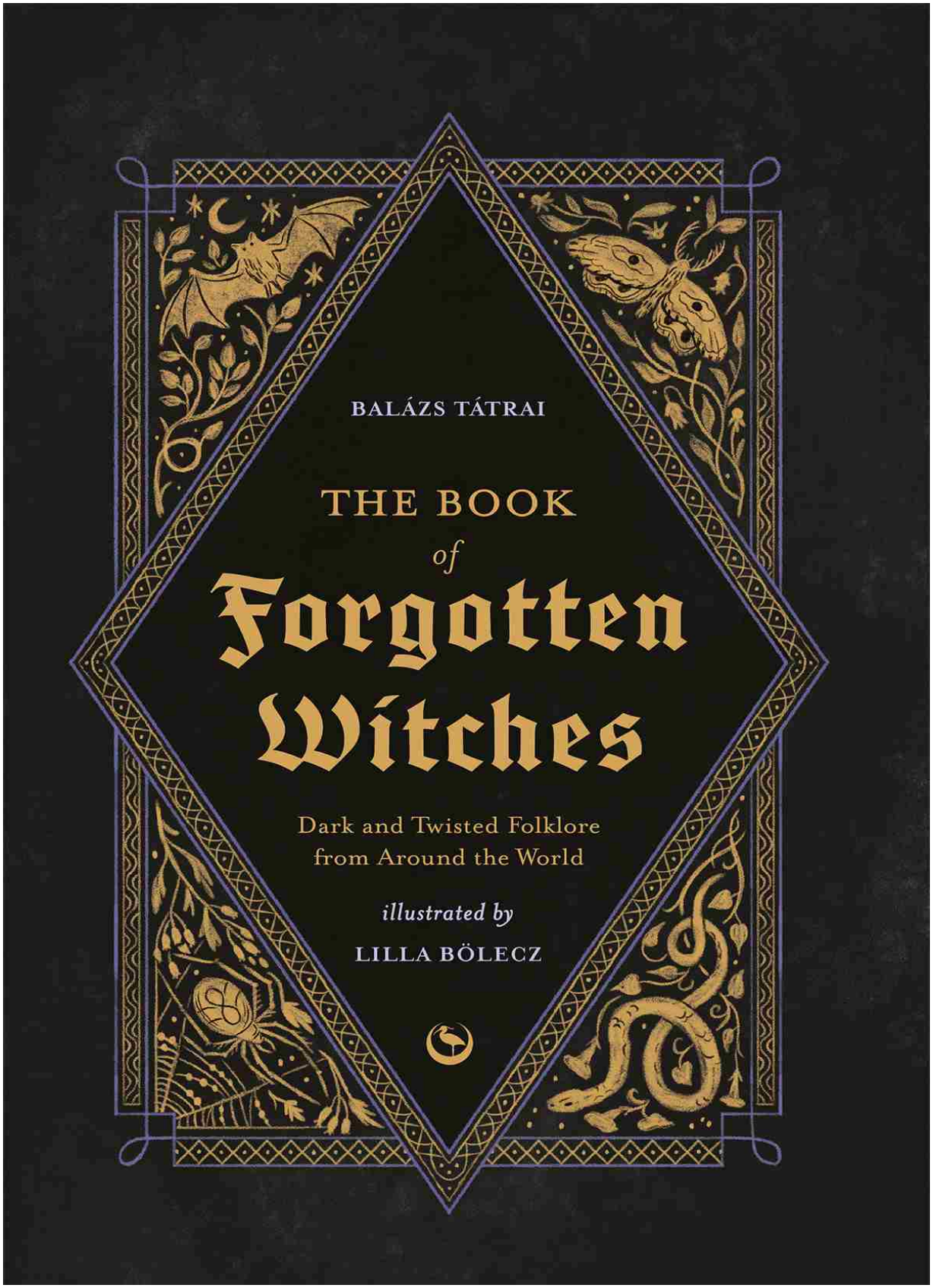
BALÁZS TÁTRAI

THE BOOK *of* Forgotten Witches

Dark and Twisted Folklore from Around the World

illustrated by

LILLA BÖLECZ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Authors' Note

THE FIGURE OF THE WITCH is so ingrained in our dreams and nightmares that it must have been thousands of years ago when someone told the first story about them. Since then, there have been many attempts – usually by people in power – to quash our fascination with witches, but all have failed. In medieval eastern Europe, King Coloman the Learned passed a law stating: "We will make no inquiry of witches, for they do not exist." In the centuries that followed, western nations were guided by the star of religion, then science, and more recently consumerism. Yet the belief in the occult – apparent supernatural powers and magical abilities – is as strong as ever. Witchcraft is all around us, from the pages of novels to films to song lyrics, not to mention the growing number of practising witches.

We invite you on a journey to the moonlit side of the world, where every shadow tells a tale of magic, persecution and perseverance. Discover witches forgotten in the mists of time and rediscover familiar stories from a new perspective.

About Witches and Witchcraft

It is surprisingly challenging to define exactly what a "witch" is because people's ideas about them have varied greatly across ages and cultures. For example, when King Coloman doubted their existence, he was referring to the sorcerers of folk tales, who were said to be able to shape-shift into animals and fly on brooms. However, he passed a law against all *malefica*

or witches capable of harmful magic. Such distinctions between good and evil witches were as common in the Middle Ages as they are today. Literary examples from the last century are the Good Witch of the South and the Wicked Witch of the West in L Frank Baum's modern classic, *The Wizard of Oz*.

It is equally difficult to pin down who can be considered a witch. Women are more likely to be accused of witchcraft and have historically suffered the most during the witch-hunts, but sometimes men and children were also put on trial. The *benandanti* of north-eastern Italy claimed to fight the evil witches known as the *malandanti,* but in the eyes of the Inquisition, all were guilty of practising forbidden magic. In continental Europe, lycanthropy was so strongly associated with witchcraft that being a werewolf was a common accusation at witch trials. So rather than simply categorizing them based on their intentions, their origin or their gender, we have organized each chapter according to the witches' predominant abilities, so we have curse-bringers, shape-shifters, nature witches and many more.

The definition of witchcraft itself can also vary from culture to culture. The word "witch" comes from the Old English *wicce* and *wicca*, meaning "a sorcerer or a magician". There are many similar beliefs in other parts of the world, and we wanted to include these stories as well. When it comes to non-Europeans, we follow the terminology of the culture they originate from. Sometimes we use the term "witch-like being", following the example of ethnographic sources.

In addition, we have included some related entities: child-stealing demons who can be seen as precursors to the figure of the malevolent witch. Deities such as Hecate, the goddess of witchcraft, and mythological figures like Lilith, who is a symbol of independence and liberation from oppression for women. Witches also have a connection with vampires –

there are many folk beliefs about dead witches coming back to life hungry for flesh and thirsty for blood.

Associations with Alchemy and Tarot

We devote a chapter to alchemists to discover the surprising parallels between them and witches. They both seek the secrets of nature and work with forces invisible to many. Alchemists have often been seen as outsiders who kept their most important discoveries to themselves, just as witches do not necessarily share their knowledge with others.

To explore the wisdom of folklore as deeply as possible, we have linked the chapters of the book to the first ten cards of tarot's Major Arcana. The first card, the Fool, has no number. He's the one who embarks on a spiritual quest, while the other cards represent steps along the journey. We have also linked the chapters and tarot cards with the steps of the alchemical process called the Great Work, which aims to create the Philosophers' Stone and, with it, turn base metals into gold. But what exactly is this gold? Some say that the alchemists did indeed seek material riches – and this might be true in most cases. But there were also some who practised spiritual alchemy, whose "gold" may mean something much harder to put into words. So, rather than potentially misleading ourselves by trying to define exactly what it is, we hope this journey through folklore, tarot and alchemy will bring us closer to that elusive spiritual gold.

For example, the first chapter introduces curse-bringers such as Baba Yaga, who disrupt the lives of those who encounter them. The corresponding tarot card, The Magician, serves a similar purpose: it reveals to us that there is more to reality than what we are accustomed to. After exposing ourselves to the hidden magic around us, we must embark on a journey of self-discovery to find our place within the expanded horizon of this strange new world. The alchemical step associated with the first chapter

is *calcination* (subjecting something to intense heat in order to purify it). This first step involves fire, the element capable of immense destruction. Paradoxical as it may sound, this fire is *vital* to initiate a meaningful spiritual change within us.

In the folktales we have relied on ethnographic sources wherever possible, but as with all oral traditions, there may be more than one version of a tale. To bring them to life, we have included our own artistic interpretations in the form of short stories and illustrations. While the folktales offer a glimpse into the lives of witches, the short stories at the end of each chapter allow for deeper reflection on tarot, alchemy and contemporary themes of witchcraft. For example, we look at how consumerism demands our souls and what we can do to resist its dark charm, a witch trial of two women who want to start a family together in a town where they are not accepted, and the distant but inspiring possibility of reconnecting with nature.

We hope you enjoy the book and discover tales you have not heard before. So, without further ado, let’s get started and dive into the dark and twisted folklore of witches!

Lilla and Balázs

Prologue

I WAS BEGINNING TO THINK nobody would ever find me again among the gothic ruins atop Raven Hill. Many years have passed since anyone has heard my call. People who stray into this place only see old stones and silent statues; they have no idea that centuries ago there was a witches' library here – the Corpus Corvorum. I had almost given up hope of receiving new visitors when you appeared in the moonlit night.

I know, too, that you felt my presence before you even set foot on the path leading up Raven Hill. So, when you reached the ruins, I was sure you would find the secret entrance. You passed the dark rocks and headed straight toward the only remaining wall of my erstwhile library, to be greeted by the statues of Hecate in her guises as a young girl and an old crone standing resolutely among the vines. Above them you saw a rose window, its stained glass miraculously intact. The masterfully crafted window depicted her as the goddess of the night, looking down at you, radiating the same power as always – for not even storms dared to harm her image. You lost yourself in her gaze until the carved inscription on the wall began to glow: *Shine, Fool, and tear away the veil that hides the World!*

Of course, you had no idea what this veil was or why you were called a fool. You didn't know I was looking for people brave enough to face the illusions in their lives and to break through the barrier that blurs the world from their eyes – people like you! And nothing could prepare you better for this journey than the magical tarot cards in my library and the ancient books and manuscripts that have taught so many witches the well-guarded knowledge of the alchemists and the wisdom of folklore.

Fortunately, the night decided you were worthy of finding the secret entrance. The full moon took on the colour of the rose window and bathed your face in its light. The rays hit the wall, the vines withdrew behind the statues and the power of Hecate revealed the arched door. For a moment you hesitated, seized with doubt, but your innate curiosity spurred you on and you entered the invisible hall of the Corpus Corvorum.

I

Curse-bringers

COME CLOSER, LET ME SEE YOU! Yes, you might be able to understand what others could not even hear. Well, what are you standing there for, now you've found me? Come inside but remember – now you're in the library of the Keeper, the custodian of the vast knowledge of the Corpus Corvorum, not among the peaceful ruins of Raven Hill. Go ahead, look at the treasures piled up on these bookshelves under the arches. Most books and manuscripts – we often call them codices – are about witches whom very few people are familiar with nowadays, so they are close to being forgotten forever.

Let me light a few more candles to make it easier to read. Their violet-coloured flames cast light the spiders like. Sit yourself down – that moth-eaten old armchair is much more comfortable than it looks.

Now … let's see … yes, here it is! The oldest codex in the Corpus Corvorum, written by my predecessors. The only additions I've made are a few entries about more recent witches. The mysteries of the tarot and the knowledge of the alchemists were included by my master and we will explore their surprising connections. We will see how a witch's curse can set us on the path to knowing our true selves, just as the spell of The Magician does in the tarot. We will discover what witches who see into the future know about The Wheel of Fortune and our destiny. The chapters of the codex will also give us a glimpse into the Great Work of alchemy and show how the tales of witches can help us on our own alchemical journey through calcination, dissolution and separation to the ultimate goal – the creation of spiritual gold.

Let us start at the beginning, with the chapter on curse-bringers! Yes, the ones like Baba Yaga, but have you heard of the others, too? Of Grýla from Iceland? Of Zhalmauyz Kempir? Of the kudiani of Georgia or the nightmare demons that are feared all over the world? No? Then listen carefully while I tell you about them. But beware, because they are sinister and powerful, and the darkness of the night will tighten its grip and only release you when you have heard my last tale. Are you ready?

Alp, Trud and Mahr

TYPE nightmare demon

AREA Central and South-Eastern Europe

POWERS nightmares, paralysis

TALE These evil spirits usually visit people at night in the form of a gruesome creature. They cause sleep paralysis and difficulty breathing by exerting physical pressure on their victims that still bears their names today: Alp is part of the German word Alptraum (literally "*Alp* dream", meaning nightmare) and Mahr can be found in the English word nightmare. Incubi, who attack women, and succubi, who seduce men afflict people in a similar way.

María Pujol, the Last Witch of Catalonia

TYPE witch

AREA Catalonia, Spain

LIVED late 1600s–1766

TALE It was an exceptionally dry, arid season in Prats de

Lluçanès. Crops were so meagre that both people and their livestock starved. Naturally, they blamed the Devil for this difficult period, along with María Pujol, a lonely old woman whom they thought was a witch. Some, though, did not believe this rumour and even during the harshest famine, they gave her food so she would not starve to death. However, in 1766, the body of a four-year-old girl was found in the village, and there was no turning back. María was accused of killing her and the liver of the girl fried in blood was found in her hut. At least this is what the witch-hunters claimed. They then took María to court, she was found guilty and was eventually hanged in Barcelona.

Lamashtu

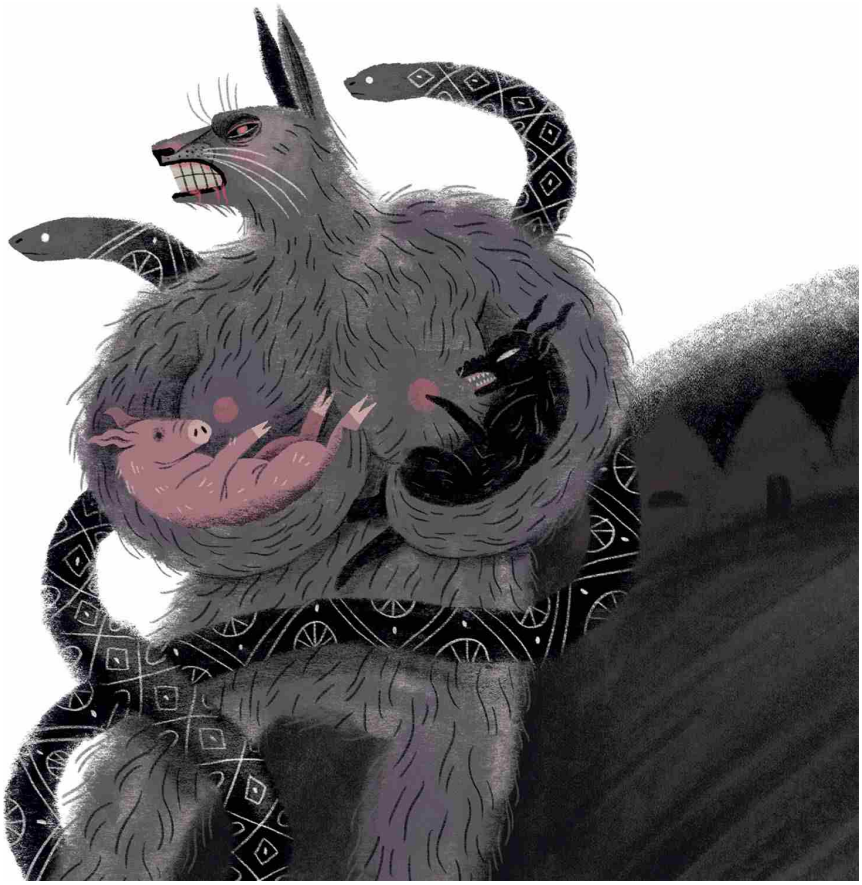
TYPE demon

AREA Mesopotamia

POWERS death through one touch

TALE Ancient Akkadians thought she was the demonic daughter of Anu, the God of the Sky. She takes the shape of a lionheaded, donkey-eared and bird-legged being with snakes in her hands, and she comes up from the underworld to visit expectant women. If she manages to touch the belly of the mother-to-be with her sharp claws, the child will never be born alive and even the woman might not survive the encounter. If she finds a newborn child, she kidnaps it and breastfeeds it with her own poisonous milk, while the mother suffers from horrible

nightmares. People protected themselves from her with magical objects and incantations.



Toad Witches

TYPE witch

AREA wherever toads are found

POWERS evil eye, curses

TALE We know of witches from countries in Africa to the UK who gain their power from the bones of toads and similar creatures. They use the remains in a powdered form or as a harmful talisman to curse anyone who confronts them or has simply turned up in the wrong place at the wrong time. They can also give you the evil eye – you can try to protect yourself with amulets, but these are often not strong enough to ward off a powerful toad witch familiar with dark magic.

Zhalmauyz Kempir

TYPE witch

AREA Kazakhstan

POWERS transformation, supernatural speed and strength

TALE Zhalmauyz Kempir has a ravenous appetite. She feels she could swallow up the whole world, along with all its horses and yurts. Even when she has just eaten 40 cauldrons of human flesh, she is already scanning the dusty horizon of the steppe for the next hero she can make into a *quyrdaq*, a meat stew. That’s after sucking out his blood first. She sits under her lonely tree disguised as a little girl, then at the right moment she transforms into her

real shape – a seven-headed, sharp-clawed, hoofed monster – to pounce on and devour her victim. Yet she hardly knows what her real form is because she can also change into anything: an animal, a human, fire or even a lung floating on water. Vaguely she recalls the image of a powerful shaman mother goddess guarding the underworld eons ago … if only she wasn't always so hungry!

Vasorrú Bába

TYPE witch

AREA Carpathian Basin (Hungarian and Székely peoples)

POWERS kidnapping fetuses

TALE In the Carpathian Basin, the *Vasorrú bába* or “iron-nosed midwife” appears in many folktales. In some versions she is the mother of dragons who swallow the sun, the moon and the stars. After the hero has killed the dragons, the *Vasorrú bába* follows him to take revenge. She opens her mouth so wide that one jaw touches the earth and the other the sky, but the hero throws the mace he has received from the Blacksmith of the world into her mouth and kills the evil witch.

She is also known as the *Vasfogú bába* or “iron-toothed midwife” and, in this form, she is the wife of the child-stealing Devil King, but she is even more powerful than him. She scrapes out fetuses with her iron nose or teeth, so she is a popular figure for scaring children. The Hungarian *bába* or “midwife” reflects how the women helping with childbirth were sometimes seen as witches who could curse the mother and the child. This belief might have originated in the high mortality rates of earlier ages.

Baba Yaga

TYPE witch

AREA Eastern Europe (Slavic peoples)

POWERS kidnapping children

TALE Baba Yaga is the ugly hag of Slavic folklore. She lives deep in the forest in a hut that turns around on a chicken foot, its fence decorated with human skulls. She kidnaps, cooks and eats the children who stray near her home. She can even fly around in an iron cauldron or a mortar – she pushes herself forward with a pestle and creates a storm all around her. Whoever strays into her hut will see a bony-legged, ancient witch, bending over her stove and stirring her dinner, which bubbles away in a huge cauldron.

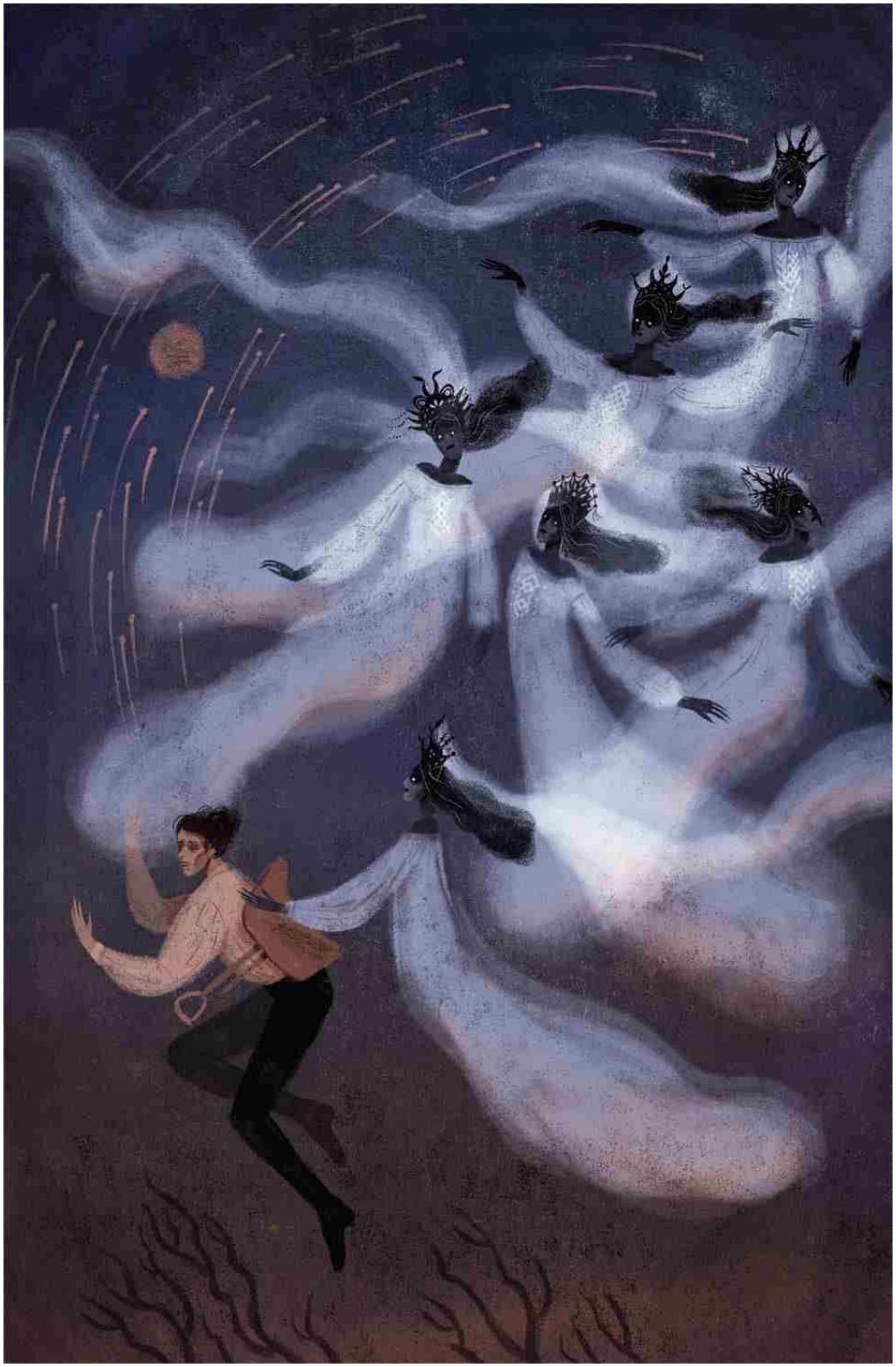
Szépasszony

TYPE demon

AREA Carpathian Basin (Hungarian and Székely peoples)

POWERS seduction, harming livestock, flying, invisibility

TALE You should take care to avoid crossroads, ditches and dunghills at midnight, as well as the eaves of buildings at noon on St George’s Day or grass trodden down in a circle at Pentecost. These are the places where enchanting *szépasszonys*, with their long hair and white clothes, dance and sing, cursing or striking down with illness anyone who disturbs their feast, even unintentionally. Sometimes they saddle and ride the intruder or make them dance until they die and, if their victim is a musician, they take them flying from one tree to another, making them play music. They do not simply fly but walk in the air. At other times, they fly by riding bed sheets, but they may also appear in the guise of a swan, a wild goose or even a whirlwind.



Alison Gross

TYPE hag

AREA Scotland, England, Scandinavia

POWERS magic, transformation

TALE The story of Alison Gross can be found in an English traditional folklore ballad first recorded in 1783, in which she's described by her would-be suitor as the "ugliest witch in the north country". This is the tale from Alison's viewpoint.

Alison Gross threw not only the mirror but all reflective surfaces out of her home a good while ago. What about the glass doors of the display cabinet? Yes, she got rid of those, too.

How can a woman have confidence in herself if all she has heard since childhood is that her main asset would be the pretty face she knows she does not have? What can she do to counter loneliness if she not only lacks beauty but is the ugliest of all hags? Alison decides to try and find a partner in the way many men do. First, she experiments with smooth compliments, then with special, expensive gifts, but neither method touches her chosen one's heart. The man does not give her a chance and rejects her with harsh words, further breaking her already aching witch-heart. Distraught, she feels she has no choice but to resort to the last desperate method – violence. So, Alison blows her grass-green horn three times and strikes the man three times with her silver wand, promptly turning him into a wyrm – a scaly, squirming dragon.

Later she chains the wyrm-man to a tree. This is not how she imagined love would be, but now she's settling simply for getting revenge. It takes another woman to break the curse. On the night of Halloween, the Seelie Court passes by and the Faerie Queen takes pity on the poor man and turns him back into a human so that he can return to his normal life. Sadly, by judging Alison purely on her looks, he never gets to know her authentic self.

Grýla

TYPE ogre

AREA Iceland

POWERS insatiable hunger

TALE Grýla lives in the mountains in a cave, and her favourite food is a stew made from children. She collects the ingredients on long, dark winter nights when she searches the villages for naughty kids. She knocks on doors disguised as a beggar and asks parents to give her those who have been misbehaving the previous year. She pulls a hundred bags behind her, each of which contain 20 children for her stew.

U'tlun'ta

TYPE witch-like being

AREA Tennessee and North Carolina (Cherokee people)

POWERS finger like a spearhead, gaining strength from devouring

livers

TALE U’tlun’ta, or Spearfinger is a stone-skinned, witch-like being known to the Cherokees of Tennessee and North Carolina, whose right index finger resembles a finger of bone or a spearhead. Her stone-skin cannot be pierced by arrows. The only way to defeat her is to find her weak spot – her heart – which is in the palm of her hand. She preys on children who wander off picking strawberries in the Great Smoky Mountains, appearing to them as their grandmother. Once she gets close enough, she strikes and kills them and feasts on their livers. Mothers who tell their children about U’tlun’ta can rest assured that their youngsters will avoid any strangers they might encounter in the woods.

Kudiani

TYPE witch

AREA Georgia

POWERS stealing hearts

TALE These ugly, hunchback witches, who have huge teeth and whose whole body is covered with hair, are known from Georgian folklore. In their original form they have a crooked tail, but they can turn into humans to mislead their victims. They travel at night on the back of a black cat or a wolf to collect people’s hearts and take them to Rokapi, their leader, who is a bad-natured, toothless old witch. Some believe that Rokapi lives in an enchanted castle. Others say she lives on a mountain, where the

kudianis gather around her at a Witches’ Sabbath-like event to feed her.

I WANTED TO SHOW YOU SOMETHING. Now, where have I put it … Oh, yes! Look at this magnificent tarot deck! In the hands of countless witches, it has turned yellow over the centuries. Let's turn over the first card of the Major Arcana, which is The Fool! Do you know why he's called that? Because many people get confused when they see someone courageous enough to get to know themselves. Who wouldn't call someone a fool for leaving behind their comfortable, ordinary life and setting off into the unknown? But don't blame them – just be happy if I call you a fool too.

Let me also tell you a story that you can't read in the books found in the Corpus Corvorum. It is about my previous visitor or, more precisely, about what happened to her before she found my library. Suffice to say that not everybody is as lucky as you were. Some do not hear my call, but if fate has so ordered it, they must find me, even if it's through meeting a magician or a curse-bringer. Such a meeting might cause a person to fall to pieces and start a transformation in them, which we call *nigredo*. This is an alchemical term that means "blackness", and its first step is *calcination*, or purification by intense heat. The fire used by the alchemists burns through to the soul and this annihilation is vital to begin our spiritual journey. But let's not get ahead of ourselves.

I will tell you the story exactly as my visitor recounted it. In fact, I will tell it as if it happened to me. I recommend you put yourself in her shoes too, as one way of getting to know ourselves is to develop the ability to experience the fate of others as if it was our own. Let this be the first trial – the exercise of The Fool!

Pierced Gitta’s Stall

THEY MADE ME SIT in the back of the classroom, next to a large window. I’d just moved to this town with my father and it was my second day at my new school. As I stared through the glass at the snowstorm outside, I tried to ignore that all too familiar sinking feeling of being the new kid.

Amid the sea of ponytails and hoods in front of me, a tall guy was looking back. I couldn’t remember his name but in my mind, I called him Baldy. I could have chosen a more flattering nickname, but I thought it suited him because his hair was shaved so close to his head.

The short, round-faced boy next to him turned and winked at me. I named him Shorty. Earlier, they had invited me to skip the next lesson and go into town. They’d said it would be our secret. I had never done anything like that before, but my dad said I had to make friends.

My heart was beating faster and I could hardly wait for the lesson to end. Finally, we jumped up from the tables and streamed out into the corridor. While the other students went off to our next lesson, the three of us were outside the school in the blink of an eye.

I tied my scarf around my neck and ran down the slushy steps to join the two guys at the bottom. Baldy stared at me with his arms folded but didn’t say a word. Shorty then turned to him and broke the silence.

“So, we ready then?”

Baldy nodded, and we walked side by side, leaving snowy footprints on the sidewalk. I started to feel nervous – I didn’t know these boys, and I had

no idea where they were leading me.

“We’re going to the market,” Shorty explained. “It’s only a few blocks away – an amazing place! We hang out there every day after school.”

“Or instead of …” Baldy added in a deep, scratchy voice.

“There’s everything! Sausages, pizzas, cheese …” Shorty halted and pointed his gloved hand at me. “Have you ever tried any specialty smoked cheese?” Before I could answer, he went on, “I know you haven’t. If all goes to plan, today you’ll get to taste my favourite!”

When we arrived, Baldy stopped me and pointed. “We’re going in over there.” He held the door open for us and the wonderful smells drew me in. The long market hall was busy and a colourful array of fresh produce was tantalizingly displayed on the stalls along the wall. How could anyone choose from so many kinds of tomatoes?

Shorty ran from one stall to the next, his eyes sparkling. In front of each one, he explained what the best buys were: fried chicken, bacon, cheese, spicy sausage … I could hardly keep up with him. I was about to decide between a pizza slice and a spicy sausage stick, when I remembered I didn’t have any money on me.

“Do either of you have any change?” I asked them. “I forgot to bring my purse.”

Baldy and Shorty exchanged surprised looks.

“Err, we’ve already spent our allowances,” Baldy replied.

Shorty laughed so hard that a tear rolled down his face. I just smiled even though I didn’t get the joke, but it felt good to laugh with them. Baldy then looked down at me, put his hand on my shoulder and stared deep into my eyes.

“We might not have any money left, but we needn’t go without! Look at all those juicy apples, pears and oranges. And over there,” he gestured to the stalls on the other side, “there’s bacon, sausages, pork, cheese! Nobody will notice if we just took a few little things …”

Before I could fully grasp what they were asking me to do, Shorty continued. “Here in the busiest part of the market it’s pretty difficult. There’s too many people and the sellers watch closely. Trust me, we’ve tried. But I know a stall with fewer people around. Let’s go.”

Shorty kept listing the delicacies waiting for us, but his words floated past my ears. I had never stolen anything in my life. I looked around; most of the stalls were manned by small, old women, just like my grandmother. How could we steal from a grandmother?

“… and Emmenthal and smoked cheese. Hey, are you listening? So, we’re going to Pierced Gitta’s stall. She’s as old as the hills, the wrinkliest seller in the whole market.”

“We call her the Iron-nosed Witch,” Baldy added. “She has such a huge piercing in her nose, you’ve never seen anything like it!”

“Definitely not on a hundred-year-old hag,” Shorty laughed. “But her cheese is delicious, and she’s old and deaf, so it’s easy pickings. You’ll see, we’re almost there.”

I hesitated but Shorty pulled me after him. By this time, I kept seeing my grandmother at every stall, offering fruit, vegetables, eggs and cold cuts to customers.

“Make friends …” I heard my father’s voice saying in my head. I glanced at the two guys. Baldy was looking around for unattended stalls, while Shorty was eyeing the produce and licking his lips. They were dead set on getting that cheese. A tiny bit wouldn’t hurt, I reasoned, and they promised it would taste amazing. Right on cue my stomach rumbled – I was getting hungry too.

We had reached the end of the main stalls, and I could now see the out-of-the-way cheese stand that Baldy and Shorty had picked out. Pierced Gitta’s stall was on its own, leaning against the back wall of the market. There was hardly anybody around it.

Sitting at the back of the stall, I saw the ancient face of the Iron-nosed Witch. She did have a piercing in her nose, but it was the ragged, tasseled scarf on her head, her deep wrinkles and the yellowish gleam in her eyes that made her live up to her nickname. She didn't look nearly as frightening as the guys had implied. Seeing the crooked stick next to her, I thought of my grandmother again, and I decided that if I had to steal, it would be the tiniest piece of cheese I could find.

Shorty's voice pulled me back from my thoughts. "Told you hardly anyone visits her stall!" he said, getting excited.

Her lack of custom made me feel sorry for the old woman and I was about to say so, when Baldy grabbed my shoulder. "So, the plan is," he started in his scratchy voice, "the rookie – that's you – diverts Pierced Gitta's attention by grabbing anything you can and running away with it to the storage corridor over there. You see?" He pointed to an entrance on the side of the market hall, surrounded by pallets. "The Iron-nosed Witch will then get up, cursing after you. But she won't get very far. Then, while she's focusing on you, we'll run over and steal a hunk of smoked cheese."

"Or two!" Shorty interrupted enthusiastically.

"What are we waiting for? I'm hungry! Let's meet at the pizza stall near the entrance after. We saw it when we came in. You can't miss it!"

With this, Baldy pushed me in the direction of Pierced Gitta's stall. I nervously eyed the side of the market hall to find the corridor I had to escape to. When I looked back, the guys had already disappeared.

I turned toward Pierced Gitta's stall. It was now or never.

I homed in on a plate on the edge of the counter, full of tiny cubes of cheese. They must be for tasting. If I stole one of those, the old woman probably wouldn't miss it.

Not even daring to look at her, I grabbed a cube of cheese and ran toward the corridor. My heart was pounding so loudly that I could barely hear the noise of the market. But I could feel footsteps behind me. The Iron-

nosed witch was coming after me and I needed to hide. I kept running past the pallets, but my foot slipped on the floor and I jumped behind the cardboard boxes piled up against the wall.

All I had to do was stay quiet. I tried to breathe slowly through my nose and clenched my teeth to stop them chattering. I was trembling all over. I bent my head between my knees, hunkering down and hugging my legs to be as small as possible.

Time seemed to whizz past, and no one had come to find me. Had I managed to get away? Did she go back to her stall? The small yellow cube had softened in my hand, and my trembling was finally subsiding. I wondered if Baldy and Shorty had been successful and made it back to the pizza stand. But just as I was thinking about heading back to them, I was discovered.

I looked up into a terrifying wrinkled face. I stared into those large, glowing yellow eyes and found I couldn't move. I was petrified. Sharp fingernails punctured holes in the cardboard between us that was slowly pulled away. The Iron-nosed Witch grew larger and larger, until her black silhouette blocked out the light. The tassels on her scarf brushed against my face as she bent closer. I could see nothing but her sinister, mesmerizing eyes.

A sickening waft of tobacco hit me as a raspy voice emanated from her shriveled lips. "I see you like my cheese! Well, go ahead and eat it, then!" she ordered.

Cowering, I stuffed the melting cheese into my mouth with shaking hands. I swallowed quickly, and closed my eyes. It went down easily and tasted good. So good! Almost immediately, I was overcome with a strange feeling of fatigue, as if I had run a marathon. Without warning, I slumped sideways and the world turned black.

A fresh breeze blew across my face and chased away the darkness. I took a deep breath and slowly opened my eyes. I was still laid among the cardboard boxes, but for how long, I couldn't say. I could hear nothing except the distant hustle and bustle of the market. I looked around, but I was alone. I slowly got up and crept back to the entrance.

Tentatively, I peeked out toward Pierced Gitta's stall. The old woman was sitting behind the counter again, as if she'd never moved. She had a customer now, a young mother holding a baby, and was smiling politely at them. The scene looked so ordinary. Had I imagined it?

"You have so many new cheeses, Mrs Gitta, I'm spoilt for choice!" the mother was saying. "Do you still have some of that smoked one you recommended last time?" The baby reached out its chubby hand toward the old woman, smiling with its toothless grin.

"Of course I do, darling! Taste anything you like. And hand over this cutie pie to me," Pierced Gitta encouraged her.

"Oh, thank you," the mother said, passing her baby over as she perused the various tasters. The baby played with the tassels on Gitta's scarf, then extended its tiny hand toward the old woman's nose piercing. She smiled down at the baby, and bounced it back and forth.

Maybe I had imagined it? Every minute that passed, my recollection became blurrier, but I vaguely remembered swallowing the cheese. How could I go back to Baldy and Shorty empty-handed? No doubt they would have stolen a huge piece of cheese for themselves, while I had only taken a tiny sample. I would never live it down.

I was thinking about how to get away without being seen when I noticed a small cube of cheese on the floor under the counter. I must have knocked it off when I'd grabbed the sample.

"And do those good-for-nothings still try to steal from you?" the young mother asked, interrupting my thoughts.

“Of course, darling, I had a few come over today. Even thieves are looking for quality products, and whoever tastes my cheese always comes back for more,” Pierced Gitta cackled.

The young mother’s returning laughter was drowned out by the noise of workers moving warehouse carts just ahead of me. Without further thought, I instinctively darted behind one of them, using it as cover to sneak closer to the cheese stall.

The cart stopped next to the counter. I looked over and there it was – an enticing little golden cube, just an arm’s length away. I didn’t care that it was on the floor. My mouth started watering immediately and I could almost feel it melting on my tongue.

I was so close, I was sure I could reach it. But just as my fingertips were about to touch it, I saw the tip of a spike poking through the top of the cheese, and a tightly coiled spring sat beside it on a wooden plate. A mousetrap! Then I noticed another one a few inches away containing a plump, furry little body and then another with a longer, sleeker form laid next to it.

Horrified, I drew my hand back. I looked at the two unfortunate creatures, and something stirred in my mind. I felt like I recognized them. Suddenly, that strange fatigue came over me again and I felt myself slump to the floor. But this time, something else was happening. I could feel myself becoming smaller and smaller. My fingers turned into small claws and fur grew on my face. My heart was pounding and I was consumed with an irresistible craving for the cheese sitting atop the mousetrap. What curse had she put on me?

I felt unable to move, yet my legs still carried me forward. All I could see was the cheese. I opened my mouth as wide as I could and enveloped the whole juicy cube, savoring its smoky crumb once more.

“Have you chosen, darling?” I heard Pierced Gitta’s voice say far above me. “Wonderful. Then I’ll hand back your little nugget, because it seems I

have caught another naughty imp."

"Oh dear, are they really ravenous today?" The mother's voice was fainter now, almost a whisper.

"Yes, darling, so it seems. That'll be nine-fifty, please."

The Iron-nosed Witch bent down and released me from the metal clips. An unusual warmth spread from where the spike had pierced through the roof of my mouth and into my head. Then, I started to rise up, higher and higher, toward the cheese stall in all its golden glory.

II

Shape-shifters

DO YOU THINK THE GIRL'S PUNISHMENT was justified? No? Neither do I, but curse-bringers are like that, they have no mercy on anyone. However, her story, unlike that of her friends, did not end in Pierced Gitta's hands. After she left her body, she drifted in the darkness to me and she is still here in my library. Sometimes we even read the books and manuscripts together. If she ventures out, I might introduce you to each other.

Talking of the codices, later we shall meet witches immensely more powerful than Pierced Gitta, who bring hope instead of curses. But for now let's find out about those who can take on the guise of various other beings. Look at the violet flame of this candle! It is turning from one shape into another and would only stop its dance if you blew it out and its smoke stopped whirling above our heads. So, what do you see in it? Yes, now I can see it too! Are we only imagining these shapes? Or have we made them come to life by imagining them?

Many witches have learned the skill of metamorphosis, but some did not become shape-shifters of their own will. For example, the nymph Daphne suffered the negative side of this magic when trying to escape Apollo's attentions. Apollo became love-struck after he was pierced by Eros's golden arrow. He fell for beautiful Daphne, chasing her relentlessly until she fled to the riverbank. There, Daphne called on her father the river god to help her escape from her would-be lover and he turned her into a laurel tree to save her. Remember this enchanted nymph the next time you see a laurel wreath on the head of a conqueror. Now let us see who can be found in the second chapter.

Thiess of Kaltenbrun

TYPE werewolf

AREA Swedish Livonia (today's Latvia and Lithuania)

TRIAL 1691

TALE We usually associate the word "werewolf" with people like serial killer Peter Stumpp, who turned into a monstrous beast with the help of a girdle he received from the Devil and devoured his own son. Many think that werewolves are witches who practise black magic, but there are some who are respected heroes, such as Vseslav the Sorcerer, ruler of Polotsk, and Old Thiess of Kaltenbrun, who fought against evil powers.

The Livonian werewolf Thiess was over 80 years old when he was exiled from Kaltenbrun for heresy. At his trial he confessed that at Pentecost, Midsummer Night, and on St Lucy's Day on 13 December, he and his companions had turned into wolves, crossed the sea and descended into hell to fight the Devil and his witches, who had robbed the people of their crops. These evil witches had fought with broomsticks and the werewolves had used iron poles. When they won, the werewolves scattered the cereal they recovered over the fields of the peasants and noblemen.

Thiess said that if he breathed into a jug three times and then proposed a toast, he could pass on his ability to someone else, but he had not yet found anyone worthy of this. Was there ever anyone remaining in Kaltenbrun who

could continue the fight or was Old Thiess the last one able to protect the crops from evil witchcraft?

Pukjinskwes

TYPE witch-like bogeywoman

AREA New England and the Canadian Maritimes (Wabanaki nations)

POWERS turning into a man, stealing babies

TALE *Pukjinskwes* is a witch-like bogeywoman in the legends of the Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, Malecite and Abanaki nations. She steals babies to raise them as her own, and her name means “jug woman” or “pitcher woman”. She can appear as a man or shape-shift into a stinging insect – in some tales she is the adversary of the hero Pogumk and turns into a mosquito after being defeated by him.

Witch-hares: Hannah Henley and Moll Stancombe

TYPE witch

AREA British Isles, Scandinavia

POWERS turning into a hare

TALE Moll Stancombe lives at the edge of Chagford, close to the moor. The god-fearing village folk keep well away from the old woman’s dilapidated shack, but at night when they are fast asleep, she wanders around the marsh in the guise of a hare. Moll is a member of the large family of witch-hares, who use the shape of a hare to mislead hunters, trick people into giving them money or suck the milk from

cows. Only silver bullets can harm them and they can run faster than hounds.

Kitsune/Huli Jing/Kumiho

TYPE supernatural being

AREA Japan, China, Korea

POWERS turning into a human, many magical abilities

TALE According to Japanese lore, *kitsune* are trickster or demon foxes. It is said that when a fox reaches the age of 100, it acquires magical abilities. It can turn into a human, create lightning and various illusions, become invisible and use a wide range of other supernatural powers. Some *kitsune* are well-meaning creatures, but not Tamamo no Mae. In the shape of a beautiful woman and under a false name she manages to infiltrate various royal courts and wreak havoc, making rulers commit murder and turn into cannibals. Or she simply sucks out their life force. You can recognize a *kitsune* turned human from her hair-covered body, her tail or her shadow, which often remains fox-shaped.

Adze

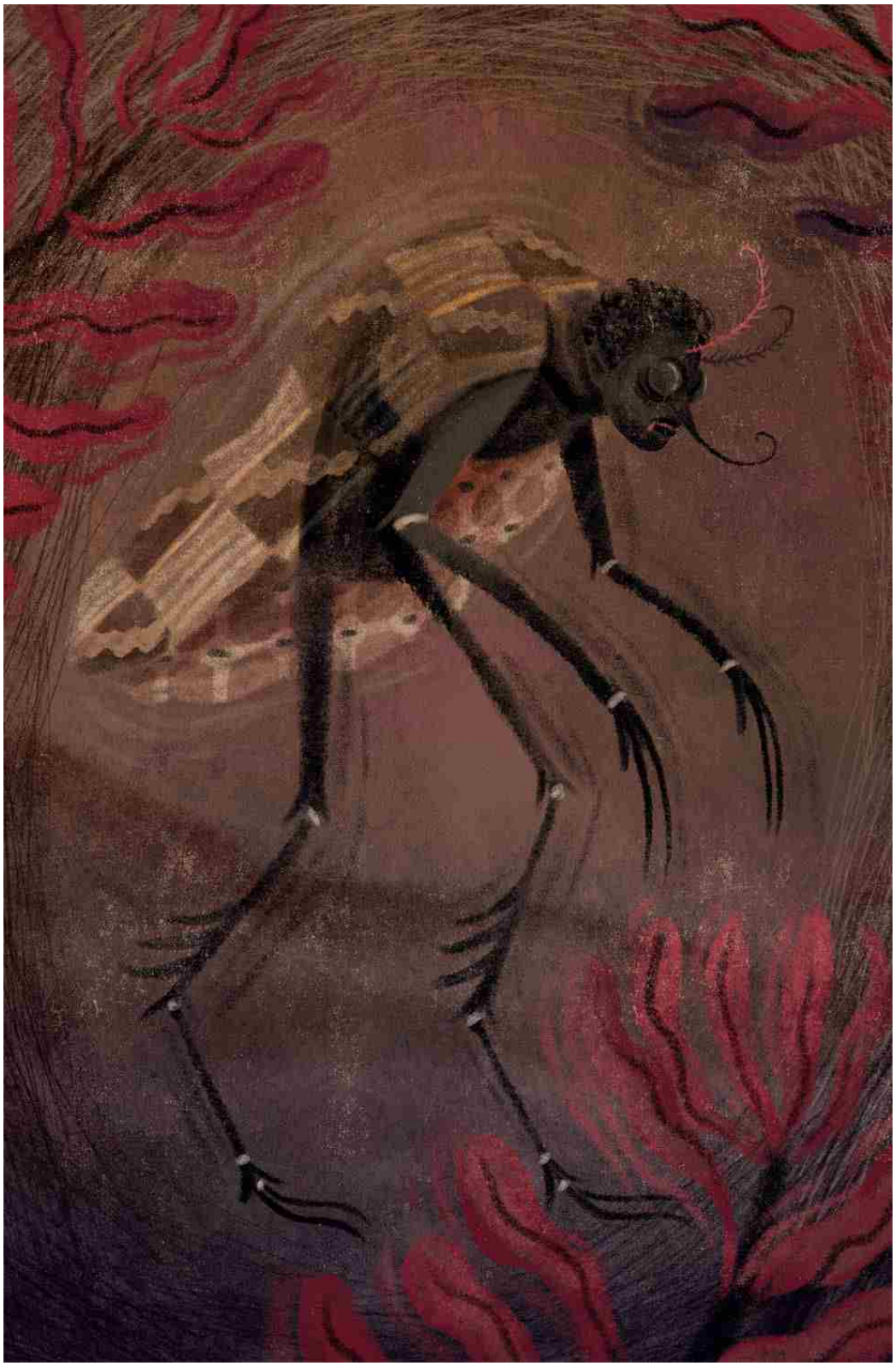
TYPE vampiric being

AREA Ghana and Togo

POWERS turning into an insect

TALE Stories of the Ewe people tell us about vampiric beings who can transform into mosquitoes or fireflies. They seek out their victims at night and can pass through the tiniest of cracks. They are not choosy, thirsting equally for the blood of men, women and children alike. They can possess their victims and drive them to madness or bring

them other kinds of misery. There is no protection against them. The only way to rid someone of them is to squeeze them out of the possessed person’s body. The expelled adzes appear human-like, with hunchbacks, soot-black skin and claws. Some say they can be killed in this form – though those brave enough to face them find them formidable and extremely dangerous.



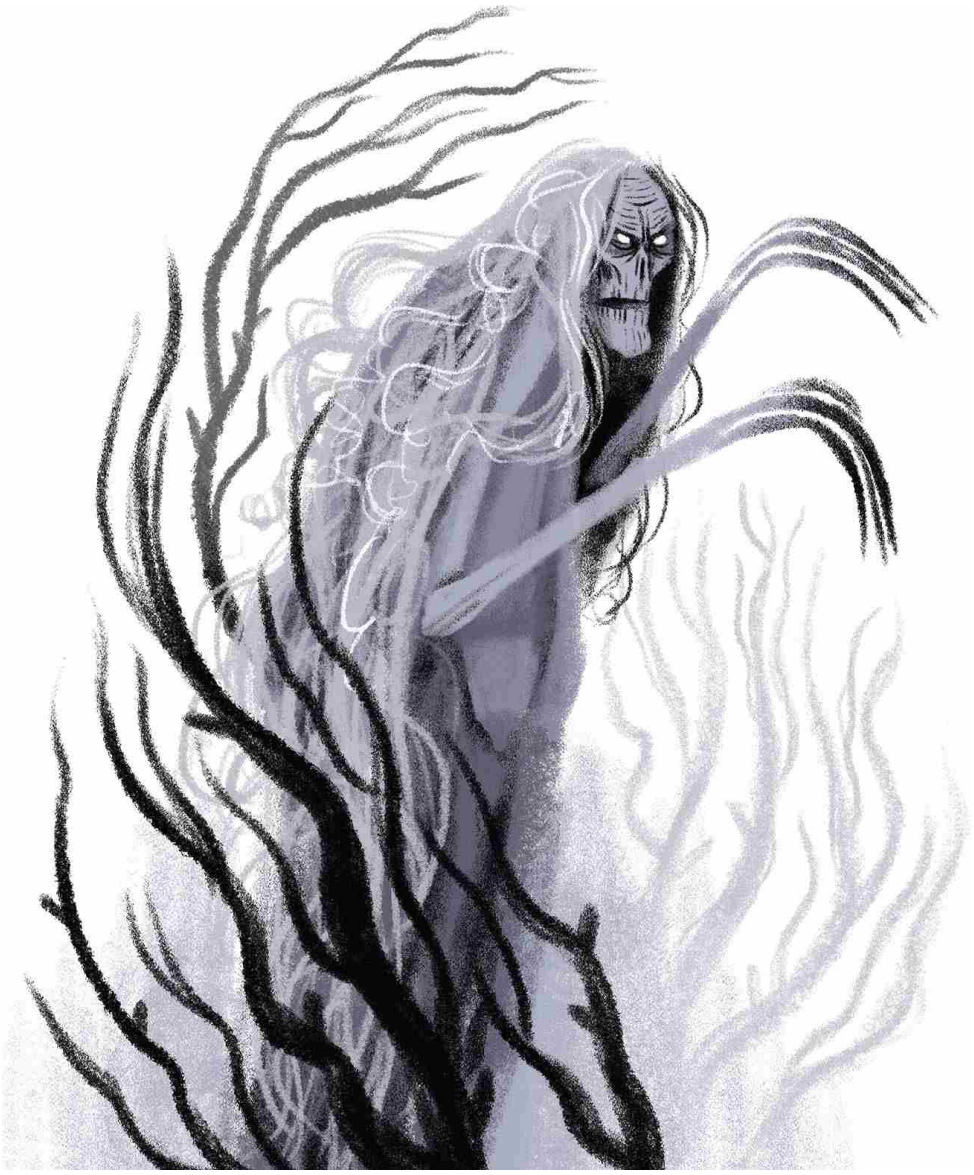
Samca

TYPE demon

AREA Romania

POWERS turning into a predator

TALE Nobody knows how the man survives this encounter. The wounds on his body heal slowly and for a long time he cannot even tell who attacked him in the dark forest. “First, I was thinking it was a bear, but when she flashed her yellow eyes at me and her sickle-shaped claws dug into my chest, I knew who fate had driven me into – Samca. So she doesn’t only hunt the newborn, then? The bear’s pelt turned into scruffy hair, deep wrinkles appeared under it, and I couldn’t move, even though she was sucking my blood.” It really is a miracle he survives. The only thing that could have protected him would have been to list all of Samca’s names, but at a moment like that, who could remember all 19 of them?



Ceridwen

TYPE witch

AREA Wales

POWERS transformation, potions, poetic inspiration

TALE A hare is running in panic from a greyhound. The hare turns into a fish, the dog into an otter and the chase continues. Then the fish morphs into a bird and flies out of the water only to get chased by a hawk. The bird turns into a grain of corn, which is swallowed up by the hawk that has now changed into a chicken – Ceridwen.

The white witch, Ceridwen, has a beautiful daughter and a hideous son. To make up for her son's looks, she spends a year and a day concocting a potion to give him the gift of poetic inspiration. But her servant steals it and gains the magical power instead. Fearing the witch's wrath, the servant turns into a hare, but is immediately chased by a huge greyhound …

Nagual

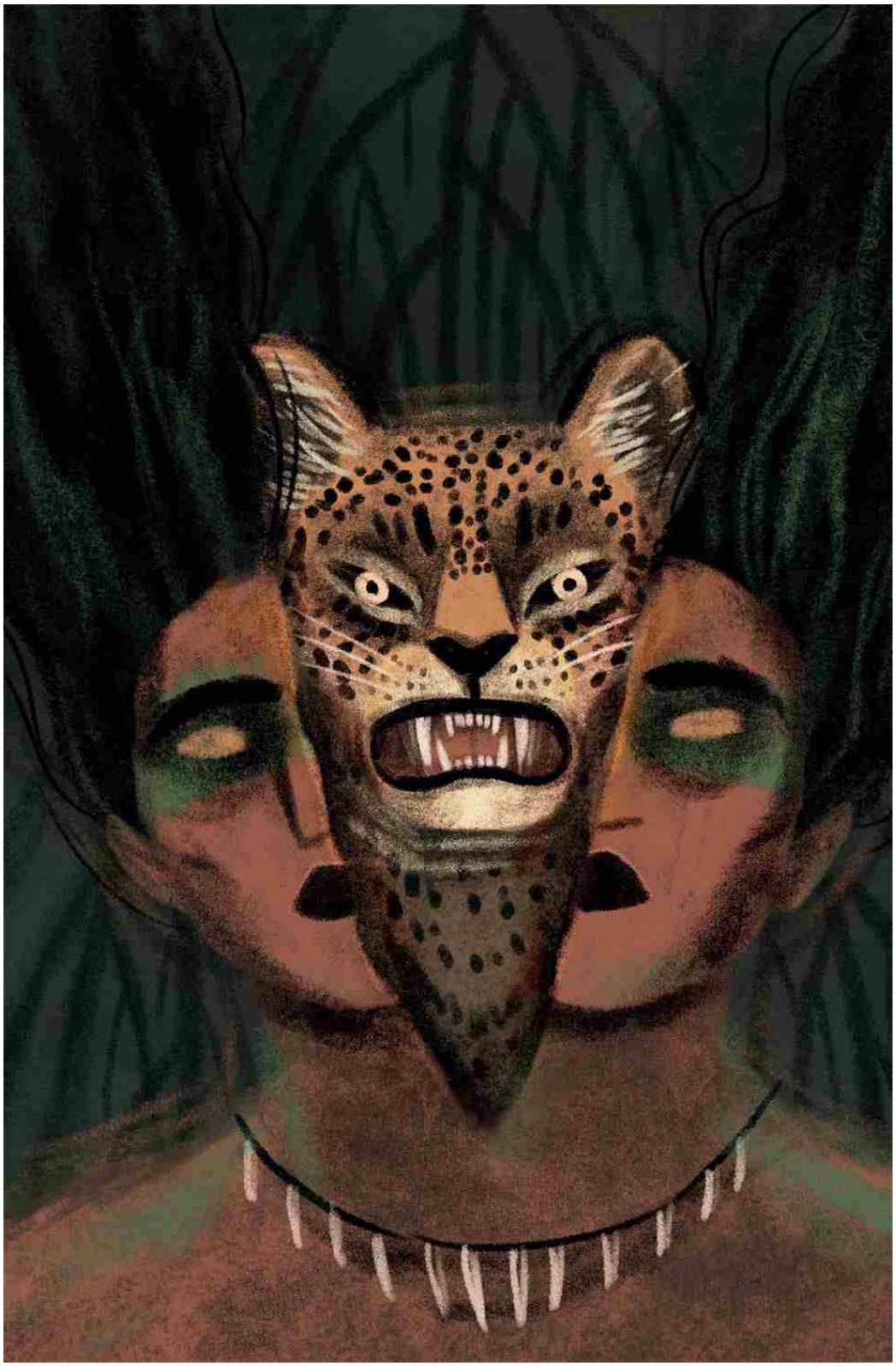
TYPE transforming witch

AREA Mesoamerica

POWERS assuming the form of their animal companion

TALE The Nahuatl of Tepoztlán, the Maya of Chan Kom, the Zapotec of Mitla and other Central American cultures tell of shape-shifters called *nagual*, capable of assuming the guise of their animal companion or *tonal*, to perform magical feats that would be impossible for mere humans. *Nagual* is just one of their many names. Depending on their *tonal*, they can assume the form of a jaguar, a deer, a snake, a bird or, in rare cases, even natural phenomena, such as thunderbolts or rain. Some say their rituals involve medicinal herbs and hallucinogens, including ololiuqui, peyote and psilocybin mushrooms. Everyone has an animal companion, but only *naguals* are able to communicate with them and assume their form. A *tonal* lives an independent life from their human counterpart, yet there is a strong bond between them. If one gets injured or falls ill, the other will have similar symptoms. This means

that even hunters respect that there are certain animals in the forest that they are not allowed to kill.



Finfolk

TYPE magical creature

AREA Scotland

POWERS power over storms and the sea, healing

TALE Not far from the Orkney Islands, in a dark town under the sea, live the mysterious, amphibious Finfolk, who sometimes appear as gloomy shadows in their small boats and kidnap humans to be their spouses. The women, when young, are beautiful mermaids who have two options. If they marry a human, they can preserve their beauty. However, if this does not happen, they have to choose a Finman of their own kind and will grow uglier as the years pass. Then the greedy, violent husband will send his Finwife among the people to perform magic and healing and bring him the silver she gets in return. If she fails, the Finman punishes his poor wife with a cruel beating.

NIGHTS LIKE THIS are perfect for the tidal forces of the moon to extinguish the flames of *calcination* and reveal what's left after the fire. If all went well, the heat evaporated the first veil of illusion – the apparent importance of our daily routine – and opened our eyes to a reality beyond what we are accustomed to. We are now prepared for the next step of alchemy – *dissolution*. The aim of this step is to replace the fluids we've lost and transform ourselves into something new with the help of refreshing water. But this time we should choose carefully which well to drink from – instead of returning to one that we are used to, we should set out on an undiscovered path that may take us further than ever before.

But not all roads lead directly to where we want to go, as the hero of my next story is about to find out. The young apprentice witch, whom everyone just called Green Rose, had such a talent for transformation that she could ultimately achieve almost anything she wanted. If she had known the High Priestess tarot card, she might have prevented the destruction such an untamed force can cause – the white-clad priestess warns us that without proper knowledge, we can lose control over our abilities, even if we have good intentions.

The Green Rose

BARON DE MONTFORT was pretending to be completely immersed in his plans for the cathedral, but he already knew the drawings on the parchment by heart. When the door creaked open and the guard announced “Her Majesty, Queen Catherine de’ Medici!”, Baron de Montfort did not react. Then, he looked up slowly from the plans and stared at his unexpected guest.

He had never met the queen, but this was just how he had imagined her. Her skirt, dotted with precious stones, looked far too glamorous in his mediocre palace. But as he eyed her golden corset, his lips twitched into a smirk. His interest lay not in the magnificent embroidery but what was hidden beneath. Of course, he would never have committed such impudence against the *real* Queen, but he knew perfectly well that the person standing in front of him, while looking exactly like her, was not Catherine de’ Medici. However, he continued the pretense, just for fun, just for a moment, and greeted his guest in his most sarcastic voice.

“How was your journey, Your Majesty? Can I offer you something?”

“A glass of wine would be most welcome,” she replied in a voice that tried to sound authoritative.

“A glass of wine? You wish! I bet you’d even like me to bow to you, wouldn’t you, Rosa? Enough of that! Transform back to yourself and tell me how the mission went.”

“It’s not that easy, sir. I’ll have to wait until the serum wears off.”

The baron’s thin, pointed moustache twitched in annoyance. He was used to everyone obeying his every order, but Rosa, a young promising witch, had been so successful in her tasks recently that he decided to turn a blind eye to her disobedience. He held out his finger with the signet ring for her to kiss – that would remind her of her place.

“Well?” the baron asked. “Those greedy merchants didn’t dare contradict the queen, did they?”

“They lowered the price immediately, sir. They even promised to deliver the stones for the new cathedral without charge. But sir, what if the queen finds out that we used her to fool the guild of traders?”

“She’ll never know, she is too busy with far more important things. But we have no time to waste. Now we’ve secured a hefty discount from the stone traders, we can start building our own cathedral … which leads me to your next mission.” He took two heavy purses from a desk drawer and threw them on the table. “Here’s your pay for this job – and the expenses for the next one. I want you to do it tonight.”

“Tonight, sir?” Rosa asked, clearly trying to hide her exhaustion.

“Well, well, is Her Majesty tired from all the hard work?”

“Of course not, sir!” Rosa answered. “What is my new mission?”

“Before we start construction, we need to clear the site. I want you to ensure that all the current inhabitants are gone by tomorrow evening.”

“From where, sir?”

“From the slums, where else?” the baron answered. “My town is the only one with ugly shacks lining the bank of the river. And the place reeks of rotting guts – I can smell it from here when the wind changes. Imagine the scandal if Queen Catherine should really decide to visit me! How could I let her see that?”

“How can I scare away so many people, sir?”

“Do you remember the frightful tales you were told as a child? I liked the one about a creature called the Gárgola. It used to be a gargoyle on

Prince Devoritall’s palace, but then it came to life and ate all the naughty children. Those slum-dwellers still believe such stories, and this is what we will use against them. Tonight, you will turn into the Gárgola, visit them and scare them into leaving. I bet that by sunrise, they will have packed all their pathetic belongings and disappeared from my town! Ingenious plan, isn’t it?” Baron de Montfort said with a boyish gleam in his eye.

Rosa looked at the baron with a pained expression, then looked down at her feet and nodded. *Shame*, the baron thought. *She must be feeling sorry for them. I will shake that out of her in no time.*

Rosa then took the purses from his outstretched hand, bobbed a small curtsey, averting her gaze, then rushed out of the salon.

There was nobody around in the palace corridors as Rosa Maëlys darted into an empty room. Her stomach was cramping from the effects of transformation serum – it was always so easy to change into somebody else but returning to true form was something she would never get used to. It required heavy concentration, all while her stomach roiled with pain. She tried desperately to recall her own short-cropped hair instead of the queen’s curls, her own black linen shift instead of the corseted velvet dress. Mama Maëlys’s serum had never let her down, and she was becoming better at the shape-shifting magic that accompanied it. *I wonder what Mama will say when I tell her I almost fooled the baron*, she thought.

After a few long, painful moments the spell was reversed. Once again, she was Rosa, sixteen-year-old witch-in-the-making, who had become so talented at shape-shifting that she had come to the attention of the baron, and he had engaged her in his service. She was barely six years old when Mama Maëlys had rescued her from the cold wintery streets. The old witch taught her magic, and it was all thanks to her that she found herself here in

the baron’s palace. It was the best life a street child like her could dream of. But it was not without its downsides.

Drawing her hood up over her head, she quickly left the palace and turned toward the river. The bridge across its body glimmered in the sunlight as she ran to tell Mama Maëlys about her latest success.

The Mandrake was Mama Maëlys’ shop. Everyone in town came to her for help and medicinal herbs to ease their aches and pains. Little did the customers suspect, however, that magical serums were bubbling in the cellar …

“Come in and close the door”, called Mama Maëlys as Rosa walked into the shop. “How did it go, Verderosa?”

“Mama! You know I don’t like being called that.”

“But I’ve told you before, it’s not up to you to decide what your name is. Verderosa is the one I gave you, not Rosa. Although, neither is your real name, of course. That’s something you will have to earn.”

“And when will you tell me what my real name is?”

“When the time comes. Right now I need help with the cauldrons!”

Rosa followed the old witch to the parlour where a hidden door in the bookshelf opened with a creak. A spiral staircase lead down into a secret underground cellar that had been transformed into a witch’s kitchen. Cauldrons of all sizes were lined up in the circular cellar, dusty vials stood on an old wooden table along with two frogs and a pair of crow’s feet, and poisonous mushrooms with a vast array of herbs hung from the beams. In the middle sat a magical stove whose flame never died out.

“So, tell me how your last transformation went!” Mama Maëlys said.

“I didn’t make a single mistake, and I even fooled the baron himself for a second! If he hadn’t known who I really was, he would have definitely offered me wine!” replied Rosa proudly, now washing out some vials.

“That’s wonderful. I know how skillfully you’ve learned to transform, and I’m very proud. But I feel I must remind you of the most important

thing of all – magic has a price. Small spells cost only a little, but big ones have a high fee. Look here!" Mama Maëlys pointed at the fire burning in the middle of the kitchen. "It's not difficult to convince that flame to keep burning forever. It's just a matter of agreement but I must also give the fire something in return."

"What did you give?" Rosa raised her head.

"That's our secret, dear," she said with a smile. "Transforming, however, has a high price, so it's important to only use it for worthwhile reasons. Remember that. Now, you need to rest and recover."

"I wish I could, but I've already been asked to begin my next mission," Rosa answered. "So … I need some more serum, please."

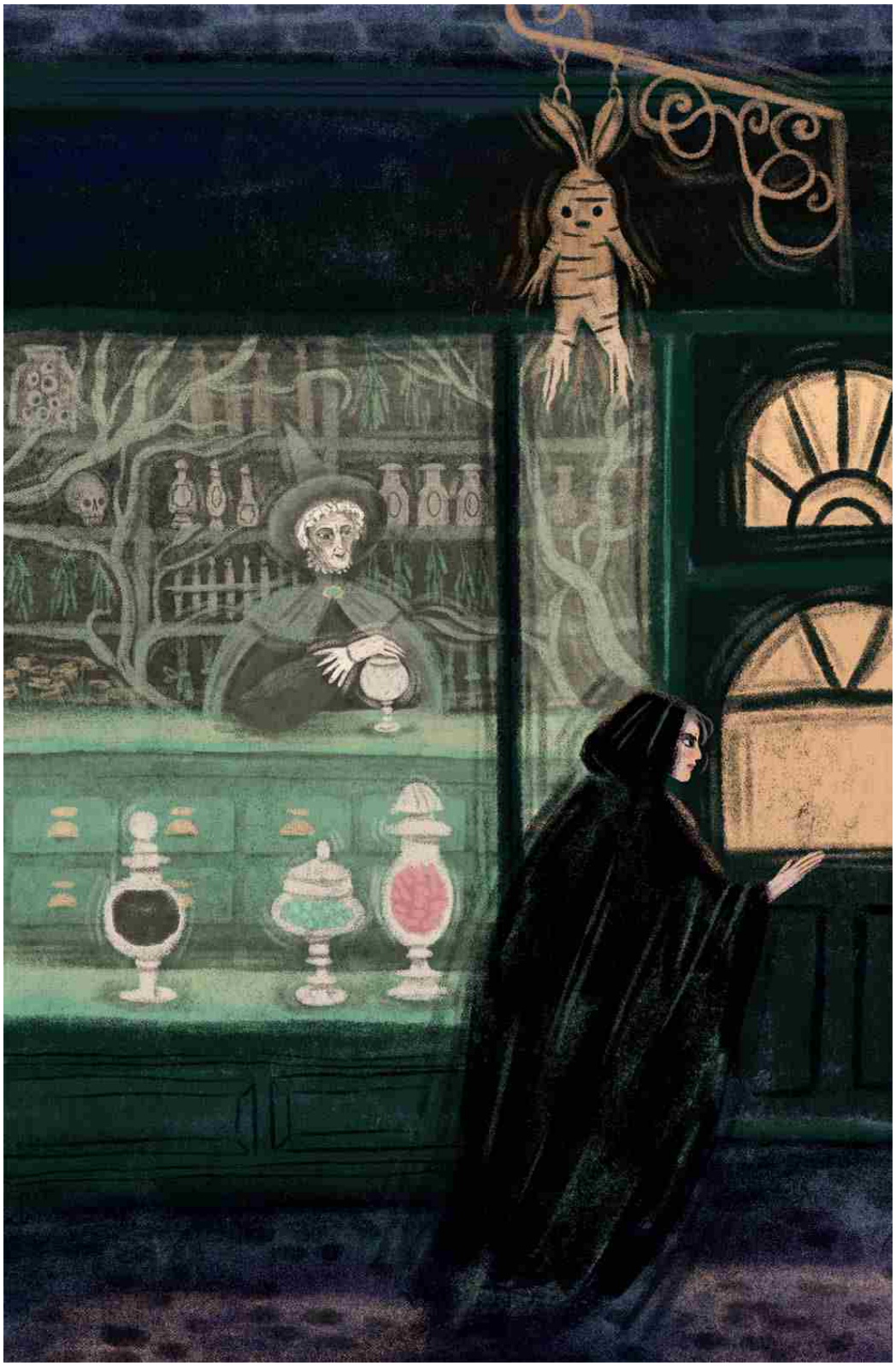
"Already?"

Rosa squirmed at the surprise in her tone. She knew she was asking for a lot, but she had little choice.

Mama Maëlys sighed deeply. "All right. I suppose you are still young and strong … Keep practicing, but don't forget what I said – every bit of magic comes at a price. Now, this time I'll let you try out my latest concoction!"

"Is it just as good as the previous one?"

"Of course, it's even stronger – look!"



Removing the lid from the biggest cauldron, the old witch inhaled the vapour. It smelled of wormwood and lavender. Then she dipped a spoon into the bubbling serum and filled a vial with it before sealing it closed and handing it to the girl.

“I felt inspired by the queen for this one. Apparently she created a fragrant spray from rosewater. They say her husband smelled so bad she had to spray him with it every morning!”

“Can I have some for the baron?” Rosa giggled.

“If you like. But not this one. This perfume is for transformation. Push in the stopper and you can spray some on yourself. As before, you must imagine the shape, clothes and voice of the person you want to impersonate and play your role as well as you can. Anyone who smells it should not be able to resist the spell.”

“Thank you, this sounds perfect!”

“Don’t thank me, just promise me that you will be careful how you use it!”

Rosa kissed Mama’s cheek to stop her from worrying, then rushed off to begin her next task.

She walked along the streets as daylight slowly faded into dusk, and her thoughts turned to the Gárgola. She wondered what it should look like and whether the new serum could even transform her into such a huge monster. She pictured the storm-torn wings, the scaly skin and the pointed claws from the tales Mama Maëlys had told her as a child. This would be her biggest accomplishment, if she could do it.

Evening had fallen on the town when she reached the bridge at the edge of the slums. She jumped down to the riverbank, hid underneath and sprayed herself with the perfume. Again, she recalled the horrible figure of

the Gárgola in her mind in as much detail as she could as the smell of wormwood and lavender filled the air.

In no time at all her transformation was complete. She looked into the water and was taken aback by her truly terrifying reflection. She stretched her arms out wide and felt the incredible strength of the Gárgola coursing through her body. She looked again at her monstrous likeness and beamed with pride.

She emerged from her hiding place and lumbered off toward the unsuspecting inhabitants of the slums. When she reached the buildings, all seemed quiet. Not wanting to wake the whole street, she decided that if she could scare just one family, the news would spread like wildfire. She stopped at a window and tapped on the glass with a sharp claw. Then she tapped again, more forcefully this time, and the glass splintered with a loud crack. The light of a candle materialized in the hut, followed by another in the building next door. Before she knew it, the entire street was awake.

Curious faces appeared in the doorways, mothers holding babies, elderly women, a one-armed man. There was nowhere for Rosa to hide. The moonlight lit up the narrow passage, and she could see the horror etched on every face.

The first scream came from inside the hut Rosa stood by. She looked in the window and saw a little girl with a face as pale as a sheet, pulling her brother back. A baby shrieked in the arms of its mother and men ran to protect the elders. The night was filled with uncontrollable screams and Rosa could hear the stirrings of neighbouring streets as panic spread.

Horrified at what she had done, Rosa rushed toward the river in despair and did not stop until the pillars under the bridge hid her from view. She wanted to change back, but the new serum was stronger than the previous one and seemed to hold faster to her skin. She concentrated on her own shape but, try as she might, she could not change back. Would she be herself again before sunrise? Panicked and alone, Rosa remained crouched

under the bridge for hours, trying desperately to transform back as the terrified screams from the townsfolk slowly faded. Then finally, without an ounce of energy left, she fell asleep from sheer exhaustion.

She was woken by the rising sun, and the bright light of the new day brought back horrible memories of the previous night. Terrified that she still looked like the Gárgola, she gingerly crept to the riverbank and checked her reflection. She breathed a sigh of relief as she found everything was as it should be – she had returned to her human shape. But she could not stop thinking about the fear she had caused with her transformation and burst into tears as guilt consumed her. She kept crying, not thinking about the mission or the baron, only of the poor slum people she had scared half to death.

What should I do now? she asked herself and closed her eyes. She knew she had to make up for the suffering she'd caused. So she wiped her tears and turned back toward the poky little streets to see what was happening. She pulled her hood over her face and made her way into the small square. A crowd had gathered in front of the one-armed man she'd seen the night before. He was standing on top of a cart, speaking to the man beside him.

"You're telling us to wait, but for what, Godelot? If this monster returns, who knows what it'll do to us?"

"I understand you're afraid. I saw the monster too – and it's true that we can't just wait idly around," Godelot replied. "But this town is our home and we must defend ourselves, even from a monstrous gargoyle!"

Rosa was surprised at the fighting spirit of the man who was desperately trying to rally his people.

"Defend ourselves? How?" the one-armed man countered. "If the baron's soldiers don't help us, we don't stand a chance! You've always tried

to lead us, but let's face it, a monster like that won't listen to words. And it won't be scared away by a few dozen townspeople, either!"

Rosa felt overcome with guilt. How could she explain how sorry she was about what had happened? She imagined running back to the palace and holding the baron accountable for his cruel mission. Of course, she knew she would never convince him to leave these people alone. *Unless* …

Suddenly she realized there *was* someone he would listen to! It was a crazy idea, but she had to give it a try. She made her way through the crowd toward the cart, jumping up beside Godelot.

"The baron is going to help you! He sent me with this message – you can count on him against the monster."

Godelot looked at her in surprise, then nodded and spoke to the people once again. "Do you hear that, my friends? The baron is with us too!" he shouted and people in the crowd started cheering.

"He wants you all to be ready at the bridge at sunset tonight with torches," Rosa continued, "because those are the only weapons that will work against the gargoyle." More and more people nodded in agreement.

"We'll protect ourselves! We won't let a monster chase us away from our town!" Godelot called. "Go back to your homes, collect as many wicks and as much resin as you can and make torches! We'll meet here at sunset and chase away that monster – with the baron's help!"

The crowd cheered loudly and Godelot turned to Rosa. "Thank you, my dear. But were you really sent by the baron? It seems so strange. He's never bothered to speak to us before, let alone aide us in protecting our home."

"Yes, he has a plan, so just play your part and everything will be fine," Rosa answered as confidently as she could.

"Well, if he really sent you, there might be some hope. We've got nothing to lose. Without his soldiers, we don't stand a chance against Gárgola and people will leave town to save themselves."

"Don't worry, it will work, I promise!" Rosa said.

Godelot nodded as Rosa quickly slipped away and headed back toward the merchants' quarter. She wished she could go directly to the Mandrake, but first she had to think through her new plan. The baron himself was the real monster. And he had used her to do his dirty work. But not anymore! Rosa was certain now which monster she must rid the town of.

As she turned her idea over in her mind, she had a sudden flash of insight and hurried back toward the Mandrake. The last piece of her plan finally fell into place. She needed more serum from Mama Maëlys. *He won't leave them alone of his own free will, but I won't give him a choice,* she thought.

"Morning, Verderosa," the old witch greeted her as she entered the shop.

"I know, I know, I'm late again," Rosa said, then threw her arms around Mama Maëlys and hugged her hard.

"Well, I'm happy to see you too." Mama Maëlys smiled, "But I have a customer, dear, so do let me go."

Rosa watched Mama take the herbs from under the counter and turn to her customer, then she went to the bookshelf and crept through the hidden door. Down in the witch's kitchen, Rosa took a vial and filled it with liquid from the cauldron. Then she filled a second one, putting both in her pocket. She took the pot from the ever-burning stove and sat down at the table Mama had laid for her, just like she had done every day since her childhood. She would need her strength to enact her plan, so she served herself some of the warm boiled cabbage Mama had made – a food she normally claimed to dislike.

She was concentrating so much on the food that she did not hear Mama Maëlys enter the kitchen.

"How did you like lunch?"

"It was delicious!"

"Really, boiled cabbage? What's wrong with you? Are you ill?"

“No, it was really tasty,” Rosa said with a smile. The old witch nodded but looked at the girl thoughtfully. Rosa waited until she’d turned around, then jumped up from her chair and rushed toward the stairs.

“What’s the hurry, Verderosa?”

“I must leave, I have a lot of things to do. Don’t expect me home tonight!” she called as she ran up the staircase.

After she left the shop, Rosa went over the steps of her plan in her mind. She knew it was possible to transform another human being but it was powerful magic. Could she do it? It would be dangerous but she had to try. It was time the baron paid the price for his greed.

When she reached the palace, Rosa took one of the vials and sprayed herself with the mist. After changing shape, she headed toward the baron’s salon. The doorman looked at her with surprise when she arrived, but after her imperious greeting, he stood up straight to await orders.

“I won’t need you any more tonight. You are dismissed.”

“Yes, sir!”

Rosa waited until the guard turned the corner, then opened the door quietly and walked in. As usual, the baron was at his desk, immersed in plans for the cathedral and did not notice her come in. Rosa reached in her pocket, grabbed the second vial and asked in a firm voice:

“So, how did the mission go?”

The baron started, hearing the familiar voice, shocked to see before him a mirror image of himself.

“What is this? Rosa, is that you?” he demanded.

“Enough of this game,” Rosa said. “Change back and tell me how the mission went. Don’t make me repeat myself!”

“How dare you! Guards, guards!” The baron kicked away his chair, scowling at his lookalike.

Rosa concentrated hard to keep herself in the baron’s form, but she knew the hardest part was still to come.

“Sit back down,” she told the baron, who was puffing with rage. “The guards will only come when I tell them to. How dare you try to command them in my palace!”

The baron’s jaw dropped as he stared at his doppelganger. “Rosa, enough of this game. Change back immediately!” He twisted his signet ring nervously around his finger.

“Have you looked in the mirror today?” Rosa asked. “You are the one who should change back, not me.” She pointed at the ornate mirror hanging on the wall. As he turned away from her, she sprayed him with the second vial of serum and focused all her strength on making the transformation happen.

A deadly silence fell upon the room as the baron stared at the monster reflected back at him. He touched the dragon-like face with his sharp claws, dropping his bony hands in shock. The Gárgola turned to Rosa and tried to speak, but instead of words, he could only utter a piercing scream that shattered the mirror into pieces. He looked around the salon in panic, swiping the plan of the cathedral onto the floor. He jumped over the table in one bound and ran out into the corridor.

Rosa followed, chasing the monster. The guards they passed raised their lances and clubs in hot pursuit but the Gárgola darted out of the palace. Some unfortunate people out taking an evening stroll ran away screaming as the scaly monster crossed their path. Rosa made sure to drive the baron toward the river. As soon as they reached the bridge, the Gárgola had no

choice but to cross to the slums where his people were waiting for him, torches in hand.

The monster found himself trapped in the middle of the bridge. Behind him, guards had closed ranks and left no room for escape. In front, the forest of torches came closer and closer. Rosa commanded her soldiers to halt and shouted at the baron:

“It is over, you cursed monster! Leave and never come back!”

There was no way out. With a final, desperate scream, the baron jumped into the river and disappeared with a huge splash. The people waited with bated breath to see if the monster would resurface but the river had already carried him downstream. Everyone cheered victorious.

Rosa looked around proudly at the enthusiastic crowd. It was becoming harder for her to keep the shape of the baron, but she had one last part of her plan to execute. Summoning her strength, she shouted: “My friends! Today, we have chased away a monster who hunted us as if we were helpless prey. But we stood up for ourselves and defeated it!”

At this point, Godelot stepped out of the crowd and put his hand gratefully on her shoulder. “Thank you, my lord!”

“We shall always protect people in this town from such monsters,” Rosa promised. “We shall treat all alike – be they merchants, nobles or common folk. From this day onward, you shall have your place on the council and as much say as the leaders of the other quarters.”

The people cheered loudly again and Rosa beamed at them all. She suddenly felt overcome with weakness, then everything went black. Had Godelot not caught her, she would have fallen into the river after the monster.

Rosa awoke in the Mandrake to Mama Maëlys stroking her face. As she rubbed her tired eyes, she saw the signet ring on her finger. She shuddered

and quickly raised her head from the old witch's lap in alarm.

"Don't worry, you'll be fine!" said Mama soothingly. "You collapsed with exhaustion, and you concentrated so hard on the spell that you have stayed in the baron's shape."

"So the effect of the serum has not worn off?"

"Not yet. I had a job convincing the soldiers not to take you back to the palace, but in the end they agreed I could take better care of you here. Don't worry, I can transform you back whenever you want."

"Of course I want to transform back! I can't stay as the baron!" she exclaimed. It was then she remembered the moment before she'd fainted. "What happened after I passed out? The real baron hasn't returned, has he?"

"No, we haven't seen him since. The people from the slums returned to their homes and celebrated long into the night. I'm so proud of you, my dear. You've done those people a great service! Would you like me to transform you back now?"

"What if the baron changes back and comes home? Mama, I can't change back as long as that monster can return! In his shape, I can protect the town and command the soldiers to chase him away if he shows up."

Staring into the ever-glowing flame, Rosa knew for sure that this was the price she had to pay.

"So that's why the spell hasn't gone away. I've never seen anything like it," Mama Maëlys muttered to herself. "Rosa, change back!" she commanded, and suddenly the signet ring disappeared from the girl's hand.

But Rosa touched her finger and the transformation was halted. She lifted her hand to her eyes and the signet ring was on her finger again. She looked in confusion at Mama Maëlys, who smiled proudly.

"Mama, what's happening?"

"The effect of the serum has long passed, but you care so much about the fate of those poor people that you no longer need a potion to transform. You can take the baron's form, or change back into yourself at will."

Rosa looked at the old witch doubtfully, then looked at her finger; with a mere thought, she made the ring disappear, then conjured it back again. Mama Maëlys smiled fondly as Rosa began to comprehend her abilities. She looked deep into Rosa’s eyes.

“Now you finally deserve to learn your true name. My darling, you are like the sweet-smelling nectar of the gods, which makes even the most evil monsters disappear from people’s dreams. As long as you remain here in this town, all those who were terrified of the baron’s tyranny can sleep peacefully. Come now, Ambrosia, you’ve slept for hours. You must be hungry … ”

III

Survivors

ROSA TOOK HER FATE into her own hands and used her powers to help others. Yet in every age there have been those who, seeing the power of witches, have worked to banish them from society. Out of envy, fear or sheer evil, they stigmatized those who were once revered as seers, healers and guardians. In the darkest of times, witch-hunters roamed the land to turn villagers against one of their own. The judges often resisted the trumped-up charges and innocent women were set free but the witch-hunts still claimed tens of thousands of victims in Europe alone. A major part was played by one of the most dangerous books ever written, the unabashedly misogynistic *Malleus Maleficarum*, or *Hammer of Witches*. Let us remember those who survived the false accusations and those who were sent to the gallows or burned at the stake, so their names outlive those of their accusers.

It is important to know them, because anyone could find themselves in such a situation – even you – and I'm talking from experience. Whichever side we find ourselves on, we might become the hunter or the hunted, so we must never forget that just because someone is denounced by a loud majority, they may not deserve to be burned at the stake.

Haters cannot even imagine what marvelous things may be born out of peacefully living together; never-heard tunes, never-seen pictures or creations like the violet-coloured candle flame dancing in front of us now. This magical colour is born from the mixture of blue and red but wouldn't exist at all if these two colours did not blend in harmony.

It is now time for us to explore the third chapter, which I need to add some more recent stories to …

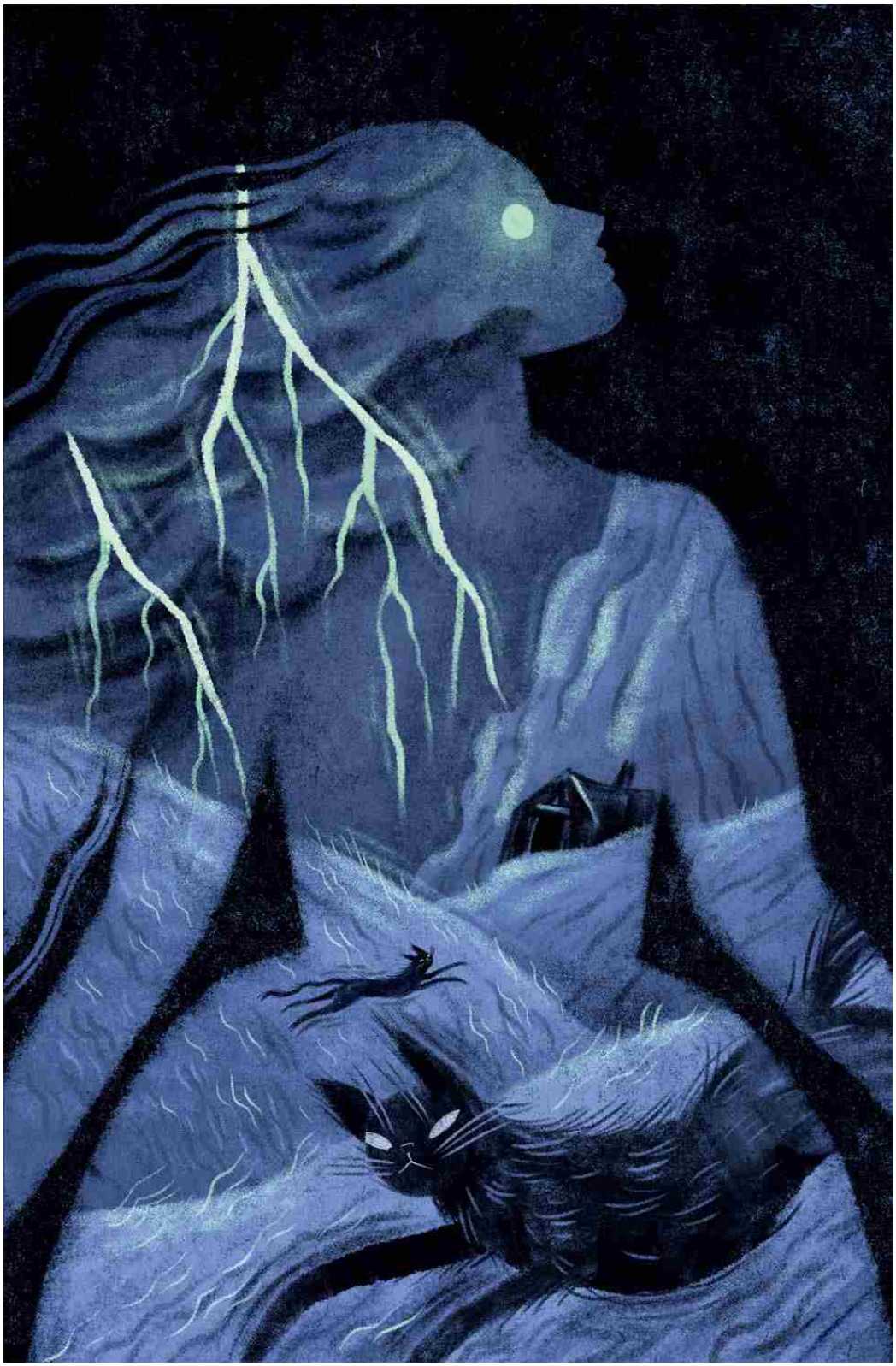
Angeline Tubbs

TYPE witch

AREA Saratoga Springs, New York

BORN *c.*1761

TALE Angeline Tubbs was born in England in the village of Watford in Hertfordshire. She was only 15 years old when she became engaged to a British soldier and sailed with him to America. After losing a battle, her fiancé abandoned her in the wilderness near Saratoga Springs, where she knew nobody. Despite being all alone in a foreign country, she found the strength to survive. She built a hut and learned how to trap animals to provide for herself. She also mastered witchcraft and was said to be able to converse with spirits during the most violent thunderstorms by standing in the middle of whirlwinds. Soon, she became known as the Witch of Saratoga, who made a living telling the fortune of those who sought her wisdom.



Crown Princess Hwi and Ho-cho

TYPE witch

AREA Korea

LIVED 15th century

TALE Hwi was born the daughter of a high-ranking official, and King Sejong himself arranged for her to marry his son, the Crown Prince. Yet the young Crown Princess Hwi could not find happiness in the Eastern Palace because her love for her husband was not reciprocated. So, she asked her servant, Ho-cho, to help her make the Crown Prince fall in love with her. Ho-cho instructed her to burn a rival's shoes to ashes. Hwi tried this with the footwear of two servants she was jealous of because her husband favoured them. But this method did not bring results. Then she rubbed her clothes with the fluids of a snake, which Ho-cho said was a sure way to make the Crown Prince fall in love with her. But this did not work either.

When another servant girl discovered the ashes from the shoes in her mistress's perfume pouch, King Sejong was informed. He was furious and ordered Ho-cho to be executed for teaching her mistress witchcraft. He then stripped the princess of her rank before expelling her from the palace. Thereafter, Hwi was forced to live her life as a commoner, but perhaps this gave her the chance to find true love without the burden of rank and status.

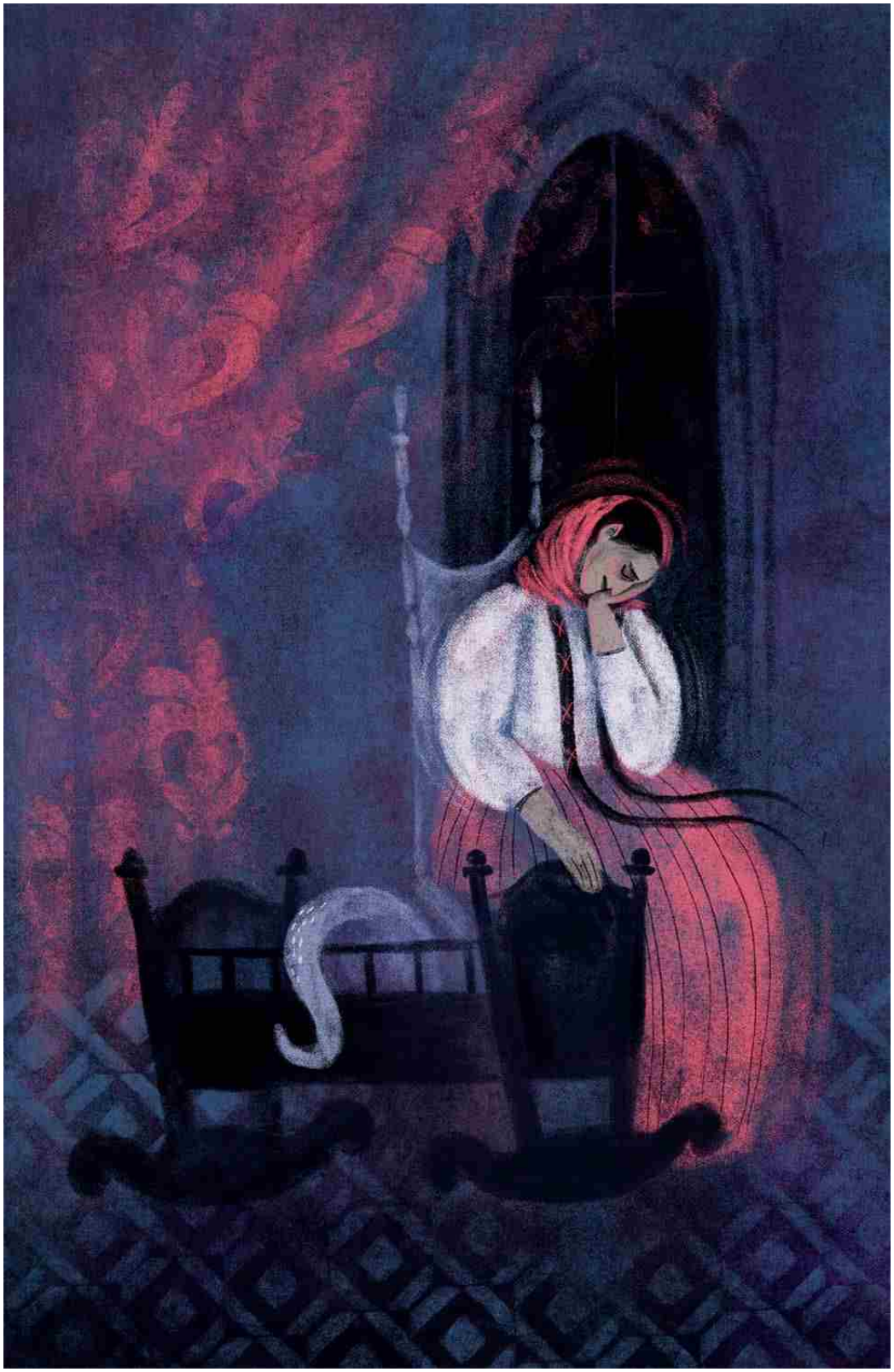
Haliurunas

TYPE witch

AREA East of the Black Sea

POWERS supernatural beauty

TALE The Goths spread a rumour that the Huns, who defeat them again and again, are keeping a horrible secret about their true origins. Filimer, King of the Goths, is said to have found witches among his people. These women, called Haliurunas, divert the attention of warriors away from battle with their supernatural beauty. So Filimer exiles these enchantresses into the wilderness to purge his army. During their forced, tortured wanderings, the Haliurunas come to the Maeotian Swamp, where they are possessed by devils. From this infernal coupling, the Huns are born – a terrifying, wild people who hold the whole of Europe in fear.



Ana, Queen of the Keshali

TYPE forest nymph

AREA Central and Eastern Europe

POWERS protecting her sisters from the demon king

TALE The Keshali nymphs are the daughters of King Haze, the personification of rain in the folklore of the Roma people. They have beautiful silky hair and live in the mountains with their queen, Ana. Thousands of years ago, the king of the Locolics expressed his desire to marry her. Ana refused his proposal, but the Locolics were no ordinary people – they had been cursed by elves and turned into immortal demons. Knowing that the savage king would not take the rejection lightly, Ana fled to her castle built on a black rock in the mountains. Furious, the king ordered his men to attack the nymphs who remained in the forest. Seeing the demons hunting her sisters, Ana came out of the castle to stop the madness and agreed to marry the brute.

Many children were born of this forced marriage, each one associated with at least one disease. The last child, Poreskoro, had four heads of a dog and four of a cat, the body of a bird and a tail like a serpent. He was responsible for the plague, as well as smallpox and cholera. When the king saw what evil power his youngest child had, he finally agreed to a divorce. Ana even made him promise that as long as she was alive he would leave the Keshali alone. He signed the contract thinking he would soon be hunting the nymphs again, but Ana had other plans.

When she returned home, she asked three of her sisters to feed her a drop of blood from their left hand every morning. The nymphs have been performing this powerful magic ever since, so that Queen Ana can live forever and the savage king could never hunt them ever again.

Kökényné, the Devil's Accomplice

TYPE witch

AREA Szeged, Hungary

DIED 23 July 1728

TALE Those gathered for the exorcism could hardly wait for the stake to catch fire under the witches and end the years of drought. The first accused was Kökényné, the Devil's accomplice, but after her confession, a whole list of crimes came to light.

The people of Szeged found Kökényné unbearable, but she had saved the life of many a midwife. Yet there were women who lost their children before they were born or themselves died in childbirth. When she was accused of killing women on purpose, Kökényné got angry and owned up to being a witch. She even accused 82-year-old chief justice Dániel Rózsa, who after hours of being tortured, admitted causing the drought that had been going on for years. He said they had put the rain in a sack and sold it to the Turks for seven years in return for money. Ultimately, 18 people were sentenced for various crimes, and 12 of them were burned at the stake. But their deaths did not end the drought.

In eastern Europe, witch trials were much rarer than in the West. In most cases, the law prohibited such accusations against either women or men.

Agnes Waterhouse

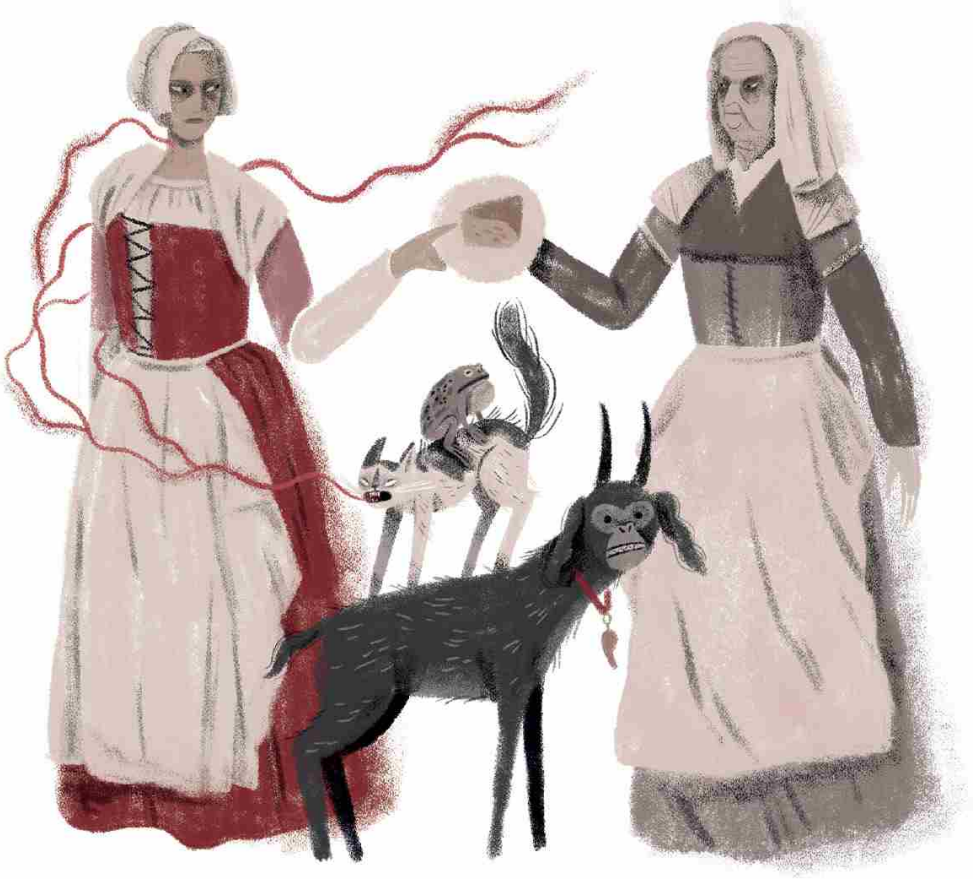
TYPE witch

AREA Essex, England

LIVED *c.*1503–29 July 1566

TALE In 1563, a new law was passed in England: witches who were caught committing a minor offence, such as making livestock ill, were sentenced to one year in prison. However, those who cursed or killed a person were hanged.

A widow from Hatfield Peverel, Agnes Waterhouse, was accused of murdering her neighbour in 1566. During the proceedings Agnes admitted to the deed and also to the murder of her husband, which sealed her fate. She talked of her familiar, Satan, a white spotted cat that had helped her. But Agnes was not the only one accused. Her 18-year-old daughter Joan was summoned to court because their neighbour claimed she too was a witch and had allegedly participated in her mother’s evil deeds. Agnes only confessed to the crimes to save her daughter’s life and in that she was successful as she was the only one hanged at the Chelmsford gallows.



Lamia

TYPE cursed queen

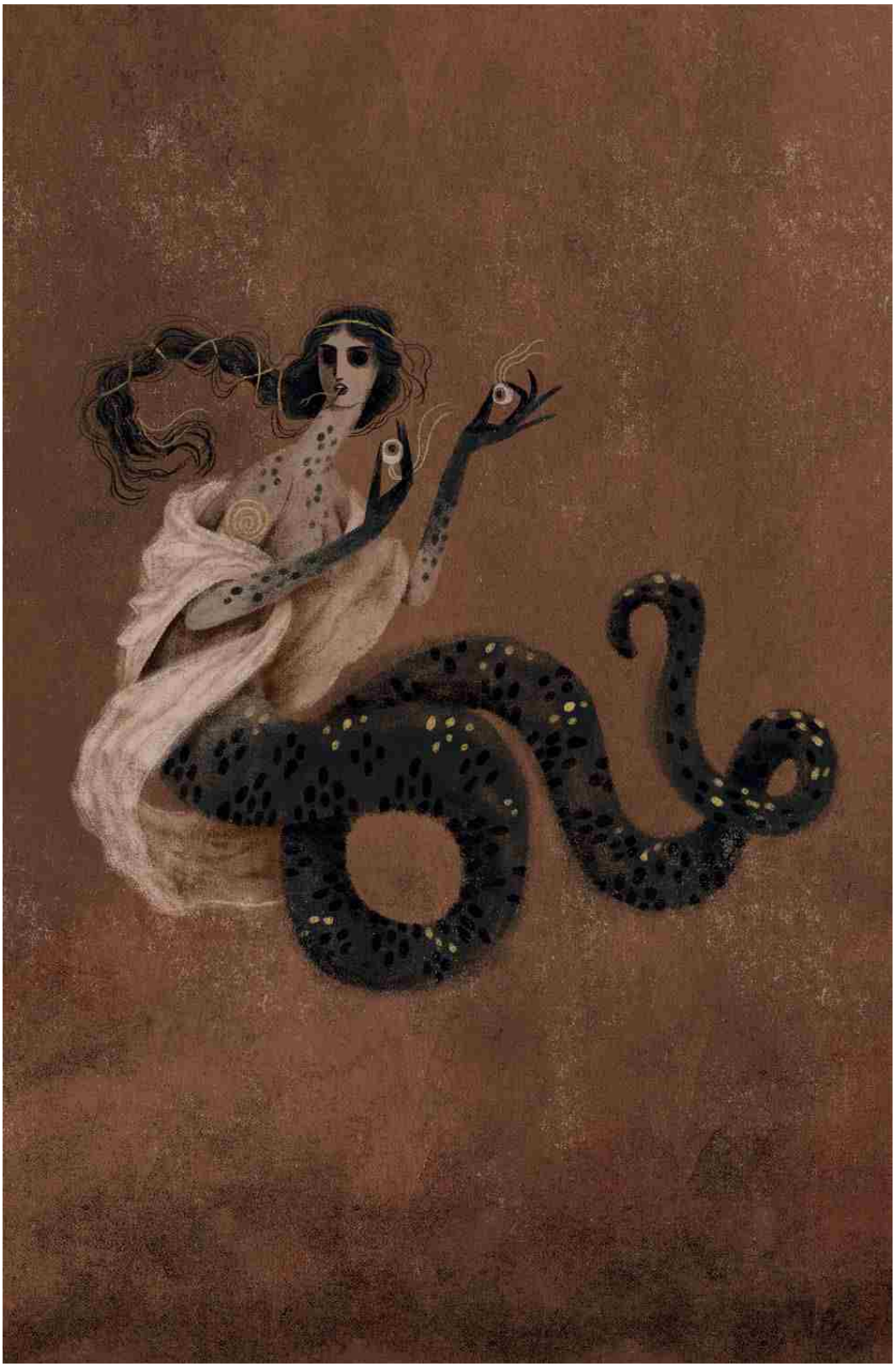
AREA Hellas

POWERS removable eyeballs

TALE Jealousy, madness and being forgotten, Lamia’s myth is a tale of three tragedies. She is the queen of ancient Libya, admired for her beauty far and wide, so it is no surprise that Zeus, the King of the Gods, set eyes on her and thus seals her fate. Hera, Zeus’s wife takes horrible revenge against her when she finds out about her husband’s latest affair. She kills all the queen’s children and curses her

with insomnia. From that point, Lamia is unable to close her eyes and her immense grief soon drives her mad. Zeus – though he could have done much more for her – grants Lamia the ability to remove her own eyeballs, so that she can sleep and get rid of her madness, at least for a short time.

And yet her real tragedy is being forgotten. Nowadays, when we hear Lamia's name, we think of the bloodthirsty, snake-bodied monster craving for the flesh of newborn children that we know from myth. But, in fact, she was an esteemed queen, who simply got caught up in the divine couple's never-ending strife.



Boksi

TYPE witch

AREA Nepal

POWERS making people sick

TALE In parts of Nepal, people believe in *boksis* – witches who have long tusks and black, unkempt hair, and suck their victims' blood at night. They are blamed when someone becomes sick with an unknown illness. If the accusers want further proof, they can ask a prestigious *jhakri* or shaman who can tell whether the woman is really a witch.

Once accused, the *boksi* is publicly tied up, tortured and marked with a hot iron. Sometimes her hair is cut because people believe this will take away her power. Then, she is ostracized from the community and her belongings are confiscated, including her land if she is a widow. Some say that seizing land is the true purpose behind accusing someone of being a *boksi*.

In Nepal, the law forbids accusing people of witchcraft. Nevertheless, a few years ago a young woman was accused of bringing an illness on her husband. In fact, the man was bedridden because of diabetes, and the woman was looking after him alone. Fortunately, she could continue to care for her loved ones, because not everyone is on the side of the accusers these days. Yet, in many parts of the world, women and children are still suspected of harmful witchcraft.

The Salem Witches

TYPE witch

AREA Salem Village, New England, USA

TRIALS February 1692–March 1693

TALE Signs of a strange, powerful hex were observed on nine-year-old Betty Parris and her 11-year-old cousin, Abigail Williams. They screamed in an unintelligible language, threw objects around the room, crawled under furniture and their bodies were contorted into unnatural shapes. Not much later, others also exhibited the same symptoms, which the inhabitants of this Puritan village attributed to being possessed by the Devil. The children insisted they had been hexed by witches and soon began to name local women.

The first accused was Sarah Good, then an enslaved woman, brought to Salem from the Caribbean and known in the records as Tituba, as well as Sarah Osborne, a sick old woman, and others also found themselves in a prison cell. In the end, over 200 people were accused of witchcraft. Thirty of them were found guilty, and after 14 women and five men were hung, people began to question the madness of Salem. Tituba was among the accused who survived their trial.

The symptoms of Betty Parris and Abigail Williams could have been explained by ergot poisoning, which is a type of fungus that sometimes contaminated the wheat used to bake bread. Over the centuries, the accusation of witchcraft has caused immense suffering, especially for

elderly women living in poverty, and continues to do so in some parts of the world today.

PERSECUTORS REPEAT THE SAME MISTAKES throughout history. They see others as the source of the problem instead of finding it within themselves. But on our journey through alchemy, we have replenished ourselves with fresh water and now we have the strength to fight prejudice – especially our prejudice against others. The next step is *separation*, and if we are ready to face our deepest faults, then it's time to see what is worth taking on our journey and what needs to be purged. Remember that we are still in the *nigredo* or "blackness" phase of alchemy, so we must face the dark side of our personality before we can move on. As painful as it is to admit that we have prejudices against others (and we all do), be assured that we will survive and be rid of these harmful traits, even if we have to spiritually scorch them with fire. When they are gone, everything around us will begin to be reborn. As with fertile soil after a wildfire, green shoots will appear as a sign that nature is ready to heal.

It is time for us to decide which path to follow. The next tarot card should help guide us: The Empress. The fresh sprout in her hand is a symbol of regenerating nature, which grows in a slightly different direction after each wildfire. So let yourself be guided by your intuition, and don't forget that small changes add up and make us resilient, so we can survive even the most devastating flames like a phoenix.

This reminds me of the story of Breeze and Heather, who were chased away from Wrothold simply because they dared to believe in something other than the town's dictatorial warden.

Nightfall

WE HAVE FINALLY ARRIVED! Stilldale *really* exists! I wouldn't have believed it a week ago – I thought it was only a legend, but the fire forced us to find it. I'm sure you've heard a lot about what happened the night after the trial. I'll fill you in on what you don't know – after all, we didn't even have time to say goodbye! Oh, and please make sure you give Ironquill water, he must be tired after the long flight to you! He is a smart raven and when he's rested, he'll be on his way back to us.

As you read this letter, the lines will disappear. Don't be alarmed! It's only to make space for the rest of it. This was another way Zerénd has helped us – he's the one who saved us from the burning house and led us over the hills to Stilldale. We took hidden paths that only he could find. It's beautiful here, you'd feel so much better if you were here too! But let's not rush ahead.

After the trial, we were so happy that, despite Sanna's best efforts, we got to keep our daughter. If she had succeeded, I don't know what I'd have done. It still has not fully sunk in that the Old God gave us the baby we wanted for so long. We had no idea then that we would be chased away, but fortunately we all survived unharmed. As I write, the baby is sleeping in Heather's arms. But let's start at the beginning.

A few days ago, we visited the shaman Zerénd to request his help in asking the Old God for a baby. He agreed at once and that very night he led us up to the hidden mountain plateau on Cloudridge where ancient rites are held. Zerénd drew sacred signs on the snow-covered altar and the mountain

started to pulse under our feet. White stardust fell on us from the pines, the silver moonlight shone through the needles and Zerénd placed a wolf's tooth in my hand. He motioned for me to dig a hole in the dark brown earth where the snow had melted, then he dropped a tiny seed into Heather's palm. She bent down and placed it into the earth and covered the hole with great care. Then Zerénd started dancing around us. His hands were tapping continuously on a deerskin drum that was decorated with magic runes and he chanted: "Higher than the sky, higher than the sky, further than the starry clouds up high!"

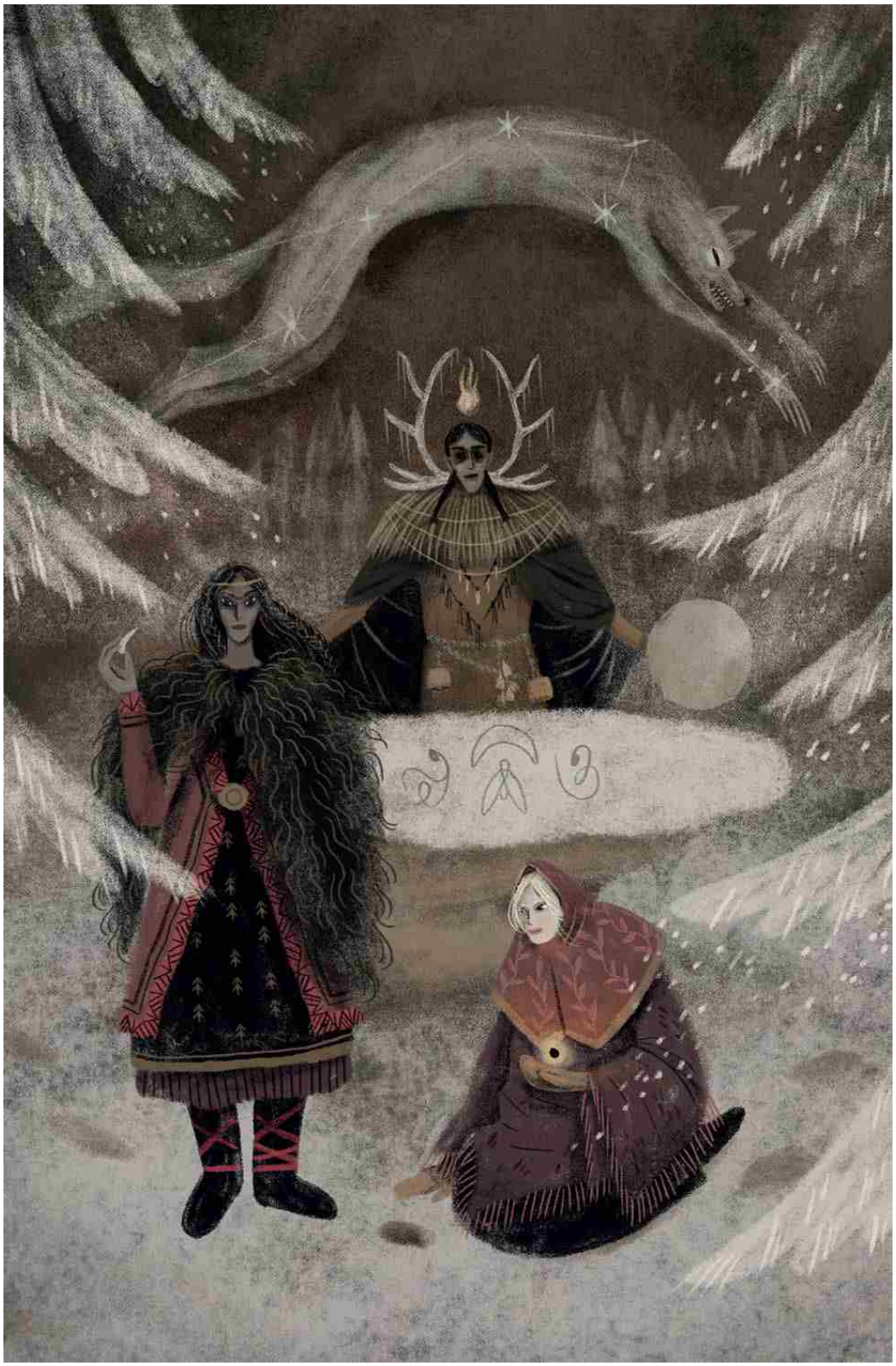
He repeated this until the moonlight became brighter, and the brown lumps of the earth moved. Then, a snowdrop – what a special snowdrop! – pushed up through the ground. It was so bright it almost shone, and we laughed together with joy. Zerénd told me to keep the wolf's tooth safe, adding, "Don't lose it, because when the time comes, it will help the Old God find you." He then tied it around my neck and told us to return home.

The next morning, we were woken by a howling sound like nothing we had ever heard before. Heather went to grab the pitchfork, but I stopped her. Remembering Zerénd's words, I held the wolf's tooth tightly and forced myself to open the door. There stood an enormous wolf staring at us with moon-yellow eyes. The animal was not growling or snarling, just waiting. Its tracks in the snow led from the direction of Cloudridge. Heather grabbed me in a panic, and I froze. But it only sniffed the air and, as if it had done its duty, turned back toward the mountains. We watched as it disappeared, then we heard a little voice murmuring. The wolf had mesmerized us so completely that we had not noticed the tiny, swaddled baby lying at our feet. Heather's face lit up and I felt as if we'd been transported to the country of the Old God, far beyond the clouds, where you can be forever happy.

Heather carefully unwrapped the baby, smiled at her and whispered: "Snowdrop!" Hearing her name, the baby started gurgling and we

embraced, holding her close. Back inside, we placed the baby in the cot we were gifted from you, and she fell asleep immediately. I began to prepare for our new arrival but Heather didn't move from Snowdrop's side … until they broke down the door.

Three men burst onto our home and I jumped up, grabbing the pitchfork. Heather was still in the back room with Snowdrop. The old scar on my face throbbed and I realized: *It must be her!* Standing among them was the short, menacing figure of Sanna. We called her the warden because she always kept her eye on everything and no decision was ever made in Wrothold without her support. I hear now that neighbours don't dare to even speak to each other, afraid that she will report them. But you already know what's going on in the town.



She walked toward me in slow, precise steps. I gripped the pitchfork more tightly and hoped that Heather would stay put. Sanna threw her shoulders back and clasped her hands behind her dark green skirt.

“Do you know why I came to visit you at this stinking little farm, Breeze?” She locked me into her gaze with her lustreless grey eyes. “Why have I come all the way here into this uncivilized wilderness, dirtying my best boots? To help you, of course. One last time, though I know you won’t ever be grateful.”

“What do you want, Sanna?”

The huge men towering behind her glowered and yet, it was Sanna’s soulless eyes that filled me with fear. “If only you’d stayed with us!” she said. “We would have found you a nice man and your brat would attend my lessons on the teachings of the Young God. Wouldn’t that have been nice, Breeze?” She spoke in that same false crooning voice she used when I was a little girl.

She pushed the pitchfork aside with her finger and stepped closer, putting her hand on my face. It was so warm! How could that be? Could her heart still be pounding inside her, struggling to keep hold of her remaining humanity? Or was this the same compassion I remembered from her class, just before her wooden stick hit my fingers and then moved to my face?

I closed my eyes, readying myself to stab her. Then she pulled her hand away and laughed mockingly.

“I see you haven’t changed a bit!” she said. “That’s good. You’ll need your courage. You didn’t think you could meet that lowlife shaman without me knowing, did you? And with Zerénd of all people, that depraved, animal-worshipping old down-and-out who imagines he’s a wizard? What were you thinking? Rules are rules! Did you think that because I made an exception for your little girlfriend, you could consult some similar *untouchable*?”

“Enough! Get out of our house!” I shouted and pointed the pitchfork at her again, now aiming between her eyes. But then crying sounded from the back room and for a moment we fell silent. Sanna’s eyes slowly widened, then she smirked at me triumphantly.

“So, this is why you went to meet Zerénd! Everything is clear now. Well, Breeze, you’re in much bigger trouble than I thought.” The lines around her mouth deepened. “I knew you wanted a child, but I never thought you’d stoop this low. Whose baby did that old vagrant steal? Which poor mother in Wrothold is now crying? Don’t worry, we’ll find out, but this time I won’t protect you. We’ll take the case to the wise man of Wrothold and Javor will decide your punishment!”

She shook her head and turned toward the door. The men stood back for their warden, who called back over her shoulder. “Be at Javor’s by noon, both of you, and bring the child, too. Or you will be dragged in front of him.”

They left and I quickly closed the door behind them. Heather was standing in the doorway when I turned back, bouncing a crying Snowdrop in her arms.

“Have they gone?” she asked.

I put my arm around her and she lay her head on my shoulder, which seemed to calm Snowdrop too.

“Did they take the dogs?” she whispered.

“What dogs?”

“The ones that were chasing the raven in the room.”

“They didn’t have any dogs. It must be your imagination.” You know how Heather gets these strange visions sometimes. “Come,” I said, “let’s have a cup of tea.”

It would have been no use to try to explain to Sanna that the baby had been a gift from the Old God; she would have only laughed. But, I

reasoned, Javor at least was different. He was only interested in truth. So after feeding Snowdrop, we set off for Wrothold.

The closer we got to Javor's hall, the more people stared at us. As we hadn't visited the town for so long, I don't think anyone recognized us. As you know, I always go there alone at dawn. Closer to the market, some people recognized me, but their smiles of greeting quickly melted away when they saw who I was with. We had expected people to be hostile, but we weren't prepared for the sheer intensity.

Javor was the first to greet us with a smile; he hadn't changed a bit. He wore a golden vest over his white shirt with no need for adornments. His snow-white beard and piercing, sky-blue eyes, which looked deep into the souls of accuser and accused alike, were striking. He offered us seats at one end of a long table and ordered the guards to bring us drinks. He asked about our journey but did not mention the baby, even though he knew we were there because of her.

Then, at noon, the huge door opened and Sanna entered with seven women wearing the same dark green uniform. Javor sat them at the opposite end of the table and then headed for the judge's chair.

Sanna waited for him to sit down and then stood up and outlined her charges against us. "Thank you for agreeing to meet us to solve this unprecedented case. This exile and her untouchable partner are responsible for snatching a baby from some unfortunate family with the help of a shaman. Yes, that baby!" She pointed at Snowdrop, and Heather instinctively pulled her scarf higher to cover our baby.

I looked at Javor, who was sitting calmly in his chair, waiting for Sanna to continue.

"We demand that this infant be returned to her mother and that these two women be banished forever from Wrothold!" the warden stated, and the women behind her nodded in agreement.

Javor’s face became serious and he didn’t take his eyes off Sanna as he spoke. “The accusation you have brought is very grave. Can you prove that Breeze and Heather are responsible for stealing this child?”

“Naturally. These two women think that there is a place for a child in their wicked life. As if they deserve it, just because they pretend they are legitimately married!” she scoffed, turning and glancing at the women behind her, who were shaking their heads. “From their barren love no life can sprout. Yet it is well known that recently they have been buying a cot, baby clothes and toys in the town. Ask anyone.”

I glanced at Heather but could see no signs of anger or fear. Instead, she stared at Snowdrop, as if the hall had ceased to exist around her.

“You have not answered my question!” Javor said sternly. “How can you prove that they are guilty of stealing the child?”

“With all due respect wise Javor, proving this is not my task. However, I am convinced that if you send the guards out to search the town, you will find the mother of this child grieving.”

For the first time Javor looked directly at us. I held his gaze, showing we had nothing to hide.

“All right,” he said and motioned to the guards. “Thank you, Sanna, you can sit down.”

The Warden nodded and returned to her entourage, whose eyes were as dead and grey as hers.

The guards set off to search the town. When I turned back to Heather, she was covering her face from the light in the hall. She looked at me and the words slipped out so softly that I could hardly hear them. “Fly or they’ll catch you!”

Then she stared at Sanna’s women as if she were somewhere far away and went on: “Snarling! Snarling with blood!”

I knew she was talking about her vision of the dogs chasing the raven, so I put my arms around her to pull her back. It was clear to me that she and I were the raven pursued by Sanna’s bloodthirsty dogs. I felt more and more hopeless and had no idea how I could protect Snowdrop if Heather’s vision became reality.

Javor clasped his hands together but before he could say anything, the door to the hall burst open and a familiar figure approached. It was Zerénd the shaman. The women squirmed anxiously in their seats and whispered to each other, while Sanna jumped up and pointed threateningly.

“What is *that* doing here? Who let it in?” she sneered. But the guards had left the hall and Zerénd was already moving to the table, skipping along in his dance-like fashion.

His huge shamanic drum was on his back, rodent bones rattled round his neck and his frayed clothes slowly filled the hall with the pleasant scent of deerskin. There was a black line painted on his forehead and his lips were blue from the juice of wild blueberries. Ironquill croaked on his shoulder.

Sanna protested louder and louder, but Javor just stared at Zerénd as if he were the most natural thing in the world.

“You forgot to invite me,” Zerénd said. “But I was passing by and thought I’d come and see how justice is served in this big town.”

“This is unacceptable!” protested Sanna. “Javor, I demand that you remove this dirty charlatan from my presence!”

“You inferred he was the one who took the child, did you not?”

“Yes, he was!”

“Well, in that case, he certainly has a place at this trial,” Javor stated.

Sanna hesitated for a moment, before composing herself. “You’re right,” she said. “He is indeed one of the accused.” She adjusted her uniform and sat back down.

Zerénd nodded and walked toward us, humming “Higher than the sky.” Then he looked at Snowdrop and started to laugh, which made the baby gurgle with delight. He brought a little ray of sunshine to the proceedings, and even managed to make Heather smile.

“So, you are Zerénd, correct?” Javor asked. “Tell me, how did Heather and Breeze get this child?”

The shaman took a seat again before answering. “My lord, I’m sure you won’t believe it, but I’ll tell you. These two lovebirds came to me with a request no human could deny – indeed, not even the heavens! The Old God visited them in the guise of a great wolf and presented them with the child they had wanted so much.”

“Blasphemy!” Sanna’s followers shouted in unison. But Sanna herself just stared at the ragged man, as if trying to work out what kind of game he was playing with her.

“Blasphemy? That depends on how you look at it,” Zerénd retorted and glanced at Sanna. “But this is what happened, I swear on everything that is sacred. Though, that might mean something different for me than for others.”

Sanna smiled uneasily. “Who do you think you are, coming to my town and telling such tales?” she said slowly. “Maybe in the old days people

listened to this type of nonsense, but you're wrong to think there's anyone left in Wrothold who worships the Old God. Everyone believes in the Young God now!"

Zerénd sighed and stood up. He took a few steps toward Sanna, then stopped halfway and opened his arms. "Who is your god to say what is right or wrong? And who is my god to say the same? The Old God is just another branch on the Tree of Life, though it may have a thousand rings. Your Young God will also get old like mine, and what then? Will you be persecuted the way you persecute us now? The strong roots of the Tree of Life reach into eternity and it has many branches. It gives life to all its leaves: to you, to me and to this young couple. Everyone. Who are we to tell each other what love is? We shall all wither and fall."

Then he turned to Javor and raised his finger. "We have more power than any god, because we can either keep the Tree of Life healthy with our love or make it rot and die with our hatred."

Silence fell on the hall.

Finally, Sanna spoke and there was a resentfulness in her voice that I had never heard before. "Tree of Life? Love? What does this gibberish have to do with this trial?" she asked, turning toward her women. "Our task here is to return this poor, stolen baby to her mother! Don't for a moment believe this tale about a gift from the Old God! The guards will soon return and this farce will be over."

But no sooner had she said this, then the door opened, and the officer of the guards entered the hall. "My Lord, we have visited all the families that have birthed a child recently, but not a single baby is missing in Wrothold," he reported.

"Thank you." Javor replied. He stroked his beard with his long fingers, then turned to Sanna. "You heard what the guard said. Do you now withdraw your charges against this young couple?"

Sanna turned to her followers, but the women were just as shocked as she was. She shook her head and rose from the table. “No! If they didn’t steal the baby, then their sin is even more grave! It’s black magic, blasphemy, blood sacrifice. Javor, you must condemn these evil creatures who poison the soul of Wrothold by their very existence! No, I shall *not* withdraw the charges. You have lost your way if you free these disgusting sinners!”

Sanna slammed her fist on the table and turned toward us, and I will never forget the words she spoke next. “You disgusting low-lives! What are you thinking? You exploit us and taint the peaceful, law-abiding people I have been trying to protect from your kind! And now you even want a child to indoctrinate with the lies of your false god? Isn’t it enough that we tolerate you? Isn’t it enough that you live among us? Answer me!” she roared, her venomous hatred erupting.

Heather looked back at her like she no longer saw Sanna, only the snarling dogs. She jumped up from her seat. “No! They are tearing out the feathers! Stop them!” she shouted and turned to Zerénd. She put her arm around Snowdrop, who miraculously still wasn’t crying.

“The Young God doesn’t condone your kind, and the time has passed when you could hide behind Zerénd’s ragged cloak! At least that charlatan keeps to himself, unlike you! How could you ever think of having a child? You make me sick!” Sanna spat on the ground. “Give me that spawn of evil!” she roared and started toward us.

We shielded Snowdrop with our bodies but the guards stopped her before she reached us.

“Enough!” said Javor. “I warn you – in my hall, all that matters is the truth. My verdict is that Heather and Breeze are innocent unless you can provide clear proof of their guilt. Case dismissed. Heath and Breeze may go and live together in peace!”

Sanna wiped her lips on her sleeve. “In *your* hall? We’ll see how long it’s *your* hall, old man! We have all witnessed what a blasphemous judgment you have passed here today. Shame on you!”

She turned her back on Javor, eyed us and stormed out of the hall, the rest of her women following.

“It’s too late!” Heather breathed, exhausted. “They are already licking blood from one another’s teeth. Nothing is left but feathers.”

Zerénd waited until the last of Sanna’s entourage disappeared, then turned to Javor. “Now what, Your Honour? I’d bet my life this is not the last we have heard from them.”

“I agree,” Javor said, and motioned to the guards.

“Escort Breeze and Heather home. Two guards will stay there all night, so no harm should befall them.”

“Thank you, Javor,” I said, and he smiled at me before his expression turned gloomy.

A small crowd awaited us outside. We walked slowly past the angry mob and hadn’t yet reached the market when the first stone was thrown at us. They targeted Heather, but Zerénd caught it before it landed. The guards closed in around us and hurried us out of Wrothold and back to the farm. Our enemies did not follow us into the wilderness, but we kept looking back for a long time before we felt safe.

You probably know what happened afterwards. Though we locked the door and Javor’s men kept guard outside, even they couldn’t protect us when our home was set alight. The dry beams caught fire fast, and by the time we woke up, thick smoke was seeping under the door. Heather picked up Snowdrop but I was paralyzed with fear. We would have burned to death had Zerénd not broken the back window. We jumped through it, running to the stables. The horses were desperate to escape from the blaze, so we galloped toward Cloudridge. Only at the edge of the wilderness did we look back at our flaming home – a place we could never return to.

But a farm can be replaced, whereas you and our other friends who stood by us when Sanna first exiled us to the farm, we miss you desperately! That is why I wanted to write to let you know that not only does Stilldale exist; it is a safe haven where anyone can find refuge. I can't tell you where it is but when you are ready to join us, just draw a branch on this sheet of paper with as many leaves as people who will accompany you. Then tie it to Ironquill's leg and he will bring it to us. Zerénd will do whatever is necessary to bring you to Stilldale.

Your friend forever,

Breeze

The last line disappeared from the paper. She folded it carefully and dropped her hands into her lap, stroking the green velvet fabric of her skirt. The crackling blaze in the hearth filled the room with a pleasant warmth, its yellow light bouncing on the fur of the dogs sleeping on the floor. She looked at the blood-stained carpet and the sea of black feathers, smiling to herself. She stepped between the dogs, bent down and picked up the raven's skull that the dogs had stripped of flesh. She threw it into the fire, along with the letter. The fire spat glowing ash into the air and the letter was consumed in seconds.

She went to the window and looked out at all the houses, cellars and attics that reeked of the smell of freedom. It made some deluded people falsely believe they could do anything they wanted in this town – *her* town. Well, she would soon root them out. She would order Javor's men to search every house. She was the one they really obeyed, she was the one in charge.

But at that very moment, as night fell, a snowdrop pushed up through the earth in the garden outside and raised its little white head. Then another one appeared and another in the garden next door, then a fourth and a hundredth …

And so, the streets of Wrothold filled with the blasphemous scent of snowdrops, which brought renewed strength to those who still had colour in their eyes, fight in their bones and love in their hearts.

IV

Avengers

THANKS TO ZERÉND, Breeze and Heather made it to Stilldale. And Ironquill? Let it suffice to say that the next day, in a nest on the highest branch of a sky-high tree, a huge ashen egg cracked open …

Who could blame you if you wanted to avenge those who suffered so much cruelty? Me, of course. Because avengers eventually become persecutors and replace the witch-hunters. The tables turn, but everything is repeated the same way as before, just with a change of roles. So, should we accept being persecuted? Of course not! We must stand up for ourselves. But when we are victorious, we should not forget that we decide the fate of those we defeat and we cannot sink to the level of a witch-hunter.

And yet there are some who do choose to avenge others' cruelty. But whereas curse-bringers take victims indiscriminately, avengers only turn against those who are hostile to them or to the ones they protect. Then there are others who help anyone who turns to them, as long as they do not exploit their kindness. One such example is Louhi, the witch of the frozen North. And there are many more, as we shall discover in the next chapter.

Louhi

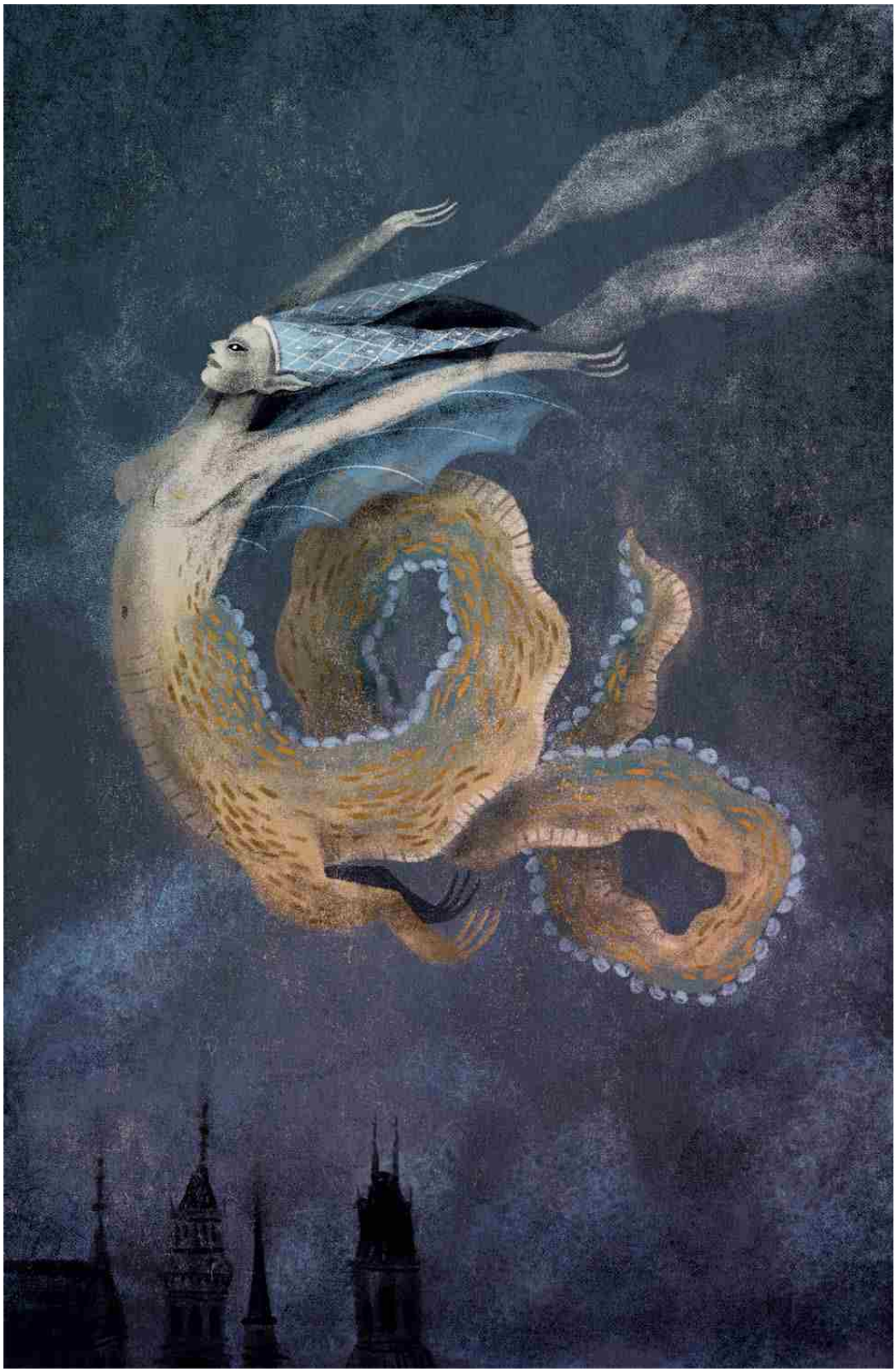
TYPE witch

AREA Finland, Karelia

POWERS giving birth to miraculous and horrible creatures, healing, creating powerful spells, affecting celestial bodies

TALE Louhi is fed up with being seen as a sidekick in someone

else's story. It's always about heroic Väinemöinen or valiant Ilmarinen. And Louhi is presented as the horrible, evil one. She hasn't been treated well. Didn't one of her daughters die because of Ilmarinen? Didn't he kidnap the other one and turn her into a seagull just because she resisted being forced into marriage? It is Louhi who saves Väinemöinen's life when he is wounded and dejected on his little boat and cannot get home without Louhi's sleigh. And he calls himself a shaman! All she wants in return is the *sampo*, the mysterious device that brings wealth and good fortune. But eventually Ilmarinen and Väinemöinen resent her having it and enviously steal it back … and she loses everything. But she will not put up with this. She will fight, even if that makes the whole world sink into the sea!



Mélusine

TYPE freshwater spirit

AREA Western Europe

POWERS turning into a dragon, building castles

TALE Can we ever overcome our parents' legacy? Or are we all destined to endlessly repeat the fate passed on to us by our ancestors in cycles of tragedy?

Take Pressyne, the fay or faerie, who marries a human. Her free-floating hair is covered with a veil, her proud neck hidden under a silk wimple. She only makes one condition to her husband – that he is not allowed to see her giving birth to or bathing her children. He agrees but breaks the promise, so Pressyne leaves him forever, taking with her their triplets: Mélusine, Palatyne and Melior.

When Mélusine is 15 years old, she and her sisters find out about their father's betrayal, so they kidnap him and imprison him deep inside a mountain, along with his treasures. Pressyne punishes her daughter by making her turn into a serpent from the waist down every Saturday. Eventually, Mélusine finds love with a human called Raymondin. Just like her mother, she sets a condition: she wants one day of solitude a week. In return she gives her husband ten children and marvellous castles to live in. But Raymondin cannot resist temptation – he spies on his wife and eventually reveals her secret in front of the whole court. The faerie then turns into a dragon and flies away.

Later, Mélusine is worshipped as the spirit of fresh water. Yet I wonder if she has ever realized when looking at her reflection in the well that despite all her rebelliousness, she is repeating her mother's life.

Aicha Kandicha

TYPE jinn

AREA Morocco

POWERS many supernatural skills

TALE Some say Aicha Kandicha, whose family and husband are killed by the Portuguese invaders, used to be a beautiful woman. But instead of fleeing, Aicha waits until nightfall to avenge the death of her loved ones. She kills many soldiers, so the survivors are convinced that they have been decimated by a supernatural being, a jinn.

Other people think she is connected with the rivers and water springs, which is why one should never pour hot water down the sink unless one wants to upset the jinn. If someone accidentally conjures her, Aicha will seduce him easily. Only later does she reveal her true, horrid face and hooved camel's feet. Whatever the truth is, I would not want to get in Aicha Kandicha's way.

Kurdaitcha

TYPE avenger

AREA Central Australia (Arrernte people)

POWERS noiseless steps, “the spear of thought”

TALE Whoever commits murder and tries to escape the verdict seals their fate. The elders will send two or three Kurdaitcha after them, because they can creep up on the condemned noiselessly in their shoes woven of emu feathers, without even leaving footprints. Once they have found the culprit, one of them goes down on one knee and points a magic object made of animal or human bone at them. This *kundela* or “killing-bone” is used as a “spear of thought” during ritual execution to inflict a lethal wound. Then, the Kurdaitcha delivers the guilty verdict in a short chant and the culprit usually dies within a few days.

Jakotsu Baba

TYPE *yokai* or supernatural being

AREA Japan

POWERS burning and freezing

TALE Grief that cuts to the bone can change anyone. This might be true in the case of Jakotsu Baba, who transforms into a horrible monster after her husband’s death. There is a blue snake wrapped around her right arm that breathes ice and freezes everything and a red snake on her left arm that breathes fire and turns everything to ashes. So don’t go looking for Jako Emon’s long-lost tombstone that’s marked with a snake. If you get too close, you will face his widow, who has been mourning and keeping vigil there for centuries, protecting her beloved’s grave from intruders.

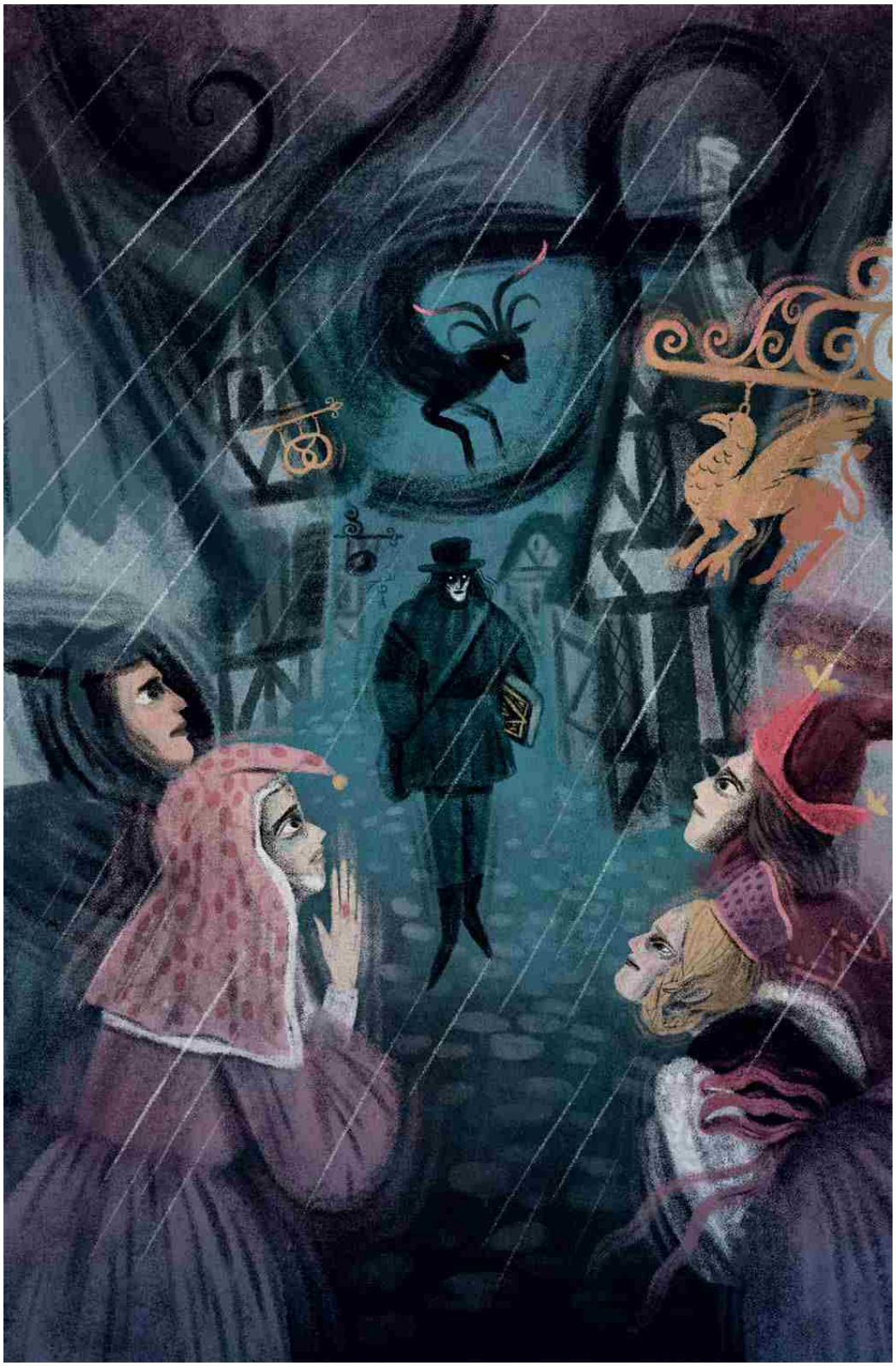
Garabonciás

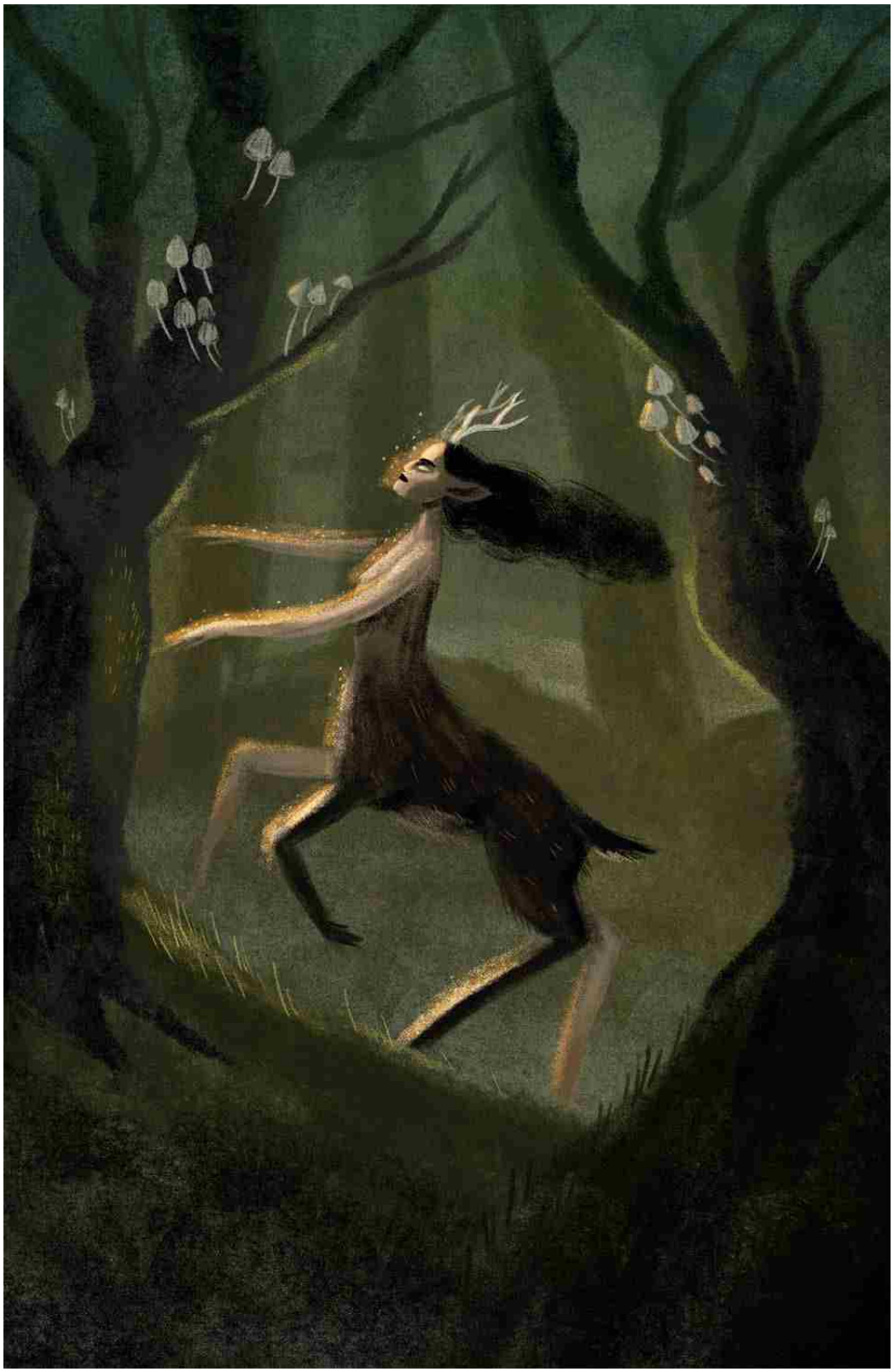
TYPE wizard

AREA Hungary

POWERS summoning a dragon, starting a storm

TALE If only we had given him what he wanted! Now it’s too late, dark clouds are gathering around the figure riding a dragon, and soon he will be sending a hailstorm down on our village that is so ferocious not even our grandmothers have lived through anything like it. Our pantry is full of curdled milk and he only asked for a little – why did we say we had none? But who would have suspected that this ragged, devilishfaced student was a *garabonciás*. He knew immediately that we were lying. He summoned a dragon from his magic book and jumped on its back. Now the creature is already tearing the roofs off the houses with its tail. Quick, to the church! Ringing the bell might be the only way to chase him away – though we might already be too late and there may be nothing that can stop this storm anymore.





Deer Woman

TYPE deer spirit

AREA North America

POWERS revenge on predatory men

TALE The Deer Woman or Deer Lady is a supernatural being in many North American folktales, including the legends of the Potawatomi, Creek, Omaha and Ponca peoples. She is usually regarded as a benign spirit who is fond of dancing, but it would be a mistake to underestimate her powers. The tales about her teach men and women how to choose a partner and emphasize the dangers of impetuous passion over respectful courtship.

Some say she was once a real woman who turned into a deer to escape a predatory man. She has been luring such men into the woods ever since to bewitch them and make sure they never have the chance to harass women again. The only way to survive such an encounter is to recognize that she has hooves instead of feet – symbolizing the power of women. If a man ignores this power, his dance with the Deer Woman will be the last thing he does on this earth.

I HOPE YOU WILL NEVER have to face an avenger, but if you do, try to understand why they are so hostile before you engage them. In the previous step of our alchemical journey, we've tried to get rid of our negative traits. These traits have been part of us for so long that if we have been successful, then we must feel quite fragmented and empty. The next step is called *conjunction* or reunification. Its purpose is to reintroduce these negative traits as positive qualities – for example, greed as generosity, prejudice and envy as renewed interest in others, lust for power as empowering our partners to achieve what none of us could have done alone. This exercise will make us whole again, but like all steps in alchemy, it has its pitfalls.

The Emperor in the tarot integrates his negative qualities with ease, and this enables him to govern his country with a firm hand and achieve any goal he sets for himself. However, he concentrates only on earthly things and he doesn't realize he isn't making any real progress. To continue our spiritual path, we first need to recognize how bogged down we are in the material world. This was the task of Amelia in the next story, who arrived in Wælmoor to examine a case of mass psychosis. But she soon realized that the symptoms people were experiencing in this village hidden in the backwaters were caused by something else entirely …

Where the Moor Reigns

WÆLMOOR WAS SITUATED in the middle of the marsh between the backwaters, about an hour's walk away. But in this weather, that time would be nearly double. Dr Amelia ban-Cofan could hardly see anything through the rain.

"Wraith sightings. Mass psychosis. Please help!" the telegram her professor received had said. He had dismissed it immediately as a joke. But the unforgettable words of Amelia's first university tutor, the one who inspired her to become a psychologist, had sprung straight to her mind: "You shall be healers of the psyche." Amelia had felt a compelling urge to put all her training to the test, so she had followed the courier, found out who sent the message, and was now leaving the city behind and heading out along the muddy dirt road to investigate. Even though Amelia had just been awarded her doctorate in psychology – the first woman at the university to receive the title – she wondered if she was doing the right thing …

She was at the edge of the moor when she saw a horse-drawn cart stuck in the mud. An old farmer was raising his whip to hit the horse, which was clearly too exhausted to go on. When the horse neighed weakly, Amelia almost felt the pain of the whip lashing her own skin.

"Enough!" she shouted, and leapt over to the farmer before snatching the whip from his hand.

"Hey!" he protested.

"What are you doing?" asked Amelia. "Can't you see this poor animal will never pull the cart out if you hit him?"

The old man opened his mouth to tell her to mind her own business when he stopped himself, his anger replaced with curiosity. “Who are you?”

“Amelia ban-Cofan. I can help get your cart out of the mud.”

“How can you do that? Trust me, another whack and Chestnut will come to his senses!”

Instead of answering, Amelia tucked the whip under her coat and stepped closer to the trembling horse. She stroked the animal’s neck. Chestnut bent his head toward her and gently blew into Amelia’s hair. The old man stared at her in bewilderment.

“Get out, and when I tell you, push the cart as hard as you can,” shouted Amelia.

The old man climbed off the cart and, upon Amelia’s instruction, gave the cart a push. To his obvious astonishment, it rolled out of the mud with such force that he almost fell over. He cursed and climbed back up. By the time he sat down he was smiling gratefully at Amelia.

“See?” she said and stroked Chestnut’s nose.

“Where are you going, miss?”

“To Wælmoor.”

“Hop on then and I’ll give you a ride.”

Amelia climbed up onto the cart and they set off. Chestnut pulled the cart through the misty rain with renewed vigour. Amelia could see nothing except the endless spears of reeds on the side of the road.

Time passed, then gradually dim spots of light penetrated the veil of fog. The cart ran onto cobblestones and they found themselves among the houses of Wælmoor.

Wraith sightings. Mass psychosis. Please help! Amelia mulled over the message that had come from a Mr Bheidh, the village pharmacist, and wondered where to start.

The farmer stopped the cart and nodded to Amelia, who jumped down onto the wide road.

“Thanks for the ride!” she said, but the old man pointed at the whip under her coat. Amelia smiled and spread her arms.

“You don’t need it anymore, sir. And, as you see, neither does Chestnut!”

The old man shook his head, flicked the reins and in a few moments disappeared into the fog.

The wide street might have been a square, but it was impossible to tell. Amelia looked around but couldn’t see anybody to ask about the pharmacist’s whereabouts. She started toward the first signboard she could make out: *The Rusty Reedmace.* A tavern!

The door creaked open when she entered, and she was hit by the smell of hops and tobacco, intermingled with music. She went down the stairs and saw a crowd of people dancing. The men wore black waistcoats, the women green, blue and pink gowns. *Rather strange behaviour for this time of day,* she thought as she passed the gramophone and approached the barman.

“Good afternoon! I’m looking for Timothy Bheidh, the pharmacist?”

“Timothy? Of course, love! But why are you in such a hurry? Let me get you a drink.”

“Thank you but I am on urgent business.”

“Okay, okay!” he replied, leaning closer to her and pointing toward the back of the room. “You see that guy with glasses in the corner? He’s the one you’re looking for. But if you want better company, come back and I’ll let you taste my best whisky!”

Amelia nodded her thanks and started toward the pharmacist. At the table furthest away from the dance party, a thin, hunched man hardly older than herself was crouching over an untouched pint of beer.

“Mr Bheidh? Excuse me, I think it’s you I’m looking for.”

The man’s round glasses reflected the hop-coloured lights of the tavern. He looked embarrassed and pulled himself together at the sight of the young woman.

“Really? Oh yes! Have you been sent from the university? Please, take a seat! Excuse me!” He jumped up to pull another chair to the table.

“Thank you. Amelia ban-Cofan,” she said, as she stretched out her hand.

“Timothy Bheidh.” The pharmacist shook her hand. “Tell me, when can we expect the doctor?”

“I *am* the doctor.”

“You? Sorry, I thought …”

“It doesn’t matter what you thought,” Amelia interrupted him. “Please tell me, what exactly is going on. Is the situation serious?” She looked toward the dancers.

“It is indeed. But these people – they have no symptoms yet. We are the last ones in Wælmoor who have not seen the wraiths. Every time another person shows signs of this madness, we let them go home so that we may stay sane.”

“You let them go home? Who’s treating them?”

“Treating, Dr ban-Cofan?” The man adjusted the glasses on his nose. “In my message to the university I indicated that in my opinion, what we’re seeing here is mass psychosis. I was hoping they would send a psychologist to confirm this.”

“I am the psychologist,” Amelia answered impatiently. “Tell me in detail what the symptoms are and where I can find the patients.”

The man lit a cigarette. “The first person who was afflicted arrived two days ago. He stormed into the pharmacy and started searching among the vials, but before I could ask any questions, he screamed and ran out. We have had 28 cases since. Slowly we worked out from their rantings that they all believed they had seen a wraith, as if in a nightmare. Except that they

saw it when they were awake. Indeed, one of the symptoms we are certain of is that the patients are no longer able to fall asleep once they've seen it."

"What makes you think that?"

"They are too afraid, miss. Quite simply too afraid. And they just blabber incomprehensibly about what they have seen. They all described the same thing. It has to be mass psychosis."

"I understand. You did the right thing, contacting the university," Amelia said, watching the dancers with concern.

She suspected this was not a case of mass psychosis at all, as that would not affect people individually and at different times. She was curious about what could have caused the symptoms but equally worried she might not be able to help them. *Maybe I should have convinced the professor to accompany me,* she pondered, but then dismissed the thought. He would never have come.

"So, everyone who has not yet experienced the symptoms is here, in this tavern?" she asked.

"Yes, Dr ban-Cofan."

"And why do you send away anyone who has seen the wraiths?"

"We don't. They leave of their own will. At first we wanted to stop them but Otis suggested letting them go, as there was nothing we could do for them. The old fool! He says he has been through all this before and we are cursed."

"Otis?"

"Otis Barron, the Mayor of Wælmoor. But take no notice of him, he is over 70. He doesn't need any psychosis to invent his far-fetched stories."

"Still, I would like to speak to him. But first, please take me to someone who has seen the wraiths, so that I can assess what we are dealing with."

Before the pharmacist could find a reason to refuse, a bloodcurdling scream interrupted the music and the dancers stopped in their tracks. A woman dressed in green stared at the people around her as if expecting

them to attack and backed away in panic toward the stairs. Then she screamed again, ran up the stairs and out of the tavern, slamming the door behind her. The others, as if used to what had just happened, resumed their dancing. Amelia was shocked and about to go after the woman, but the pharmacist caught her arm.

“Please, there is no use. Trust me, I have seen what is coming almost 30 times now. You can’t do anything for her. Lily will run home and close the doors and windows. All we can do is hope that her hallucinations become milder with time.”

“There must be something we can do! Have you tried giving them any medicine?”

“I have tried everything. Opium, morphine, nothing works. The first patient has not slept a wink for almost two days now. I check on them every few hours and several of them are showing symptoms of severe insomnia. In my opinion the biggest danger for these people is lack of sleep.”

“I agree. We must find the root cause so that we can treat the patients properly. But first, we need to understand exactly what we are facing. Mass psychosis does not attack people one by one – so that’s not what is happening here. Mr Bheidh, do you have any explanation for why you and the others are not hallucinating?”

“I have been thinking about this all day and I still have absolutely no idea. Is it the alcohol? The music? The dancing? But then why is there a new victim every few hours?”

Amelia tried in vain to remember any similar cases from her studies. She could recall dozens of cases but none where the afflicted fell victim to psychosis without any apparent preliminary episodes.

As she was pondering, an elderly gentleman in a finely cut but threadbare suit walked over to them and addressed the pharmacist in a voice husky from smoking.

“So, this is where you’ve been hiding! And who’s watching the future lunatics, son?”

“Lily has just gone home,” Timothy answered and stared worriedly into his jug.

“And you’re already chatting up a new girl, I see!”

“This is Dr ban-Cofan, a psychologist from the university,” Timothy introduced Amelia, who held out her hand.

“From the city? Ah, welcome, dear,” the old man said and raised her fingers toward his lips to kiss them, but Amelia pulled back her hand with a firm movement.

“I beg your pardon, miss,” he apologized, bowed his head and continued. “Let me introduce myself. Otis Barron, Mayor of Wælmoor, at your service.”

Recognizing the name, Amelia looked at the village leader. He was a short man with a grey moustache and a cane. She was about to offer him a seat but Otis was already serving himself some beer from Timothy’s jug and sat down at the table with them.

“Do you know what you’ve got yourself into, miss?”

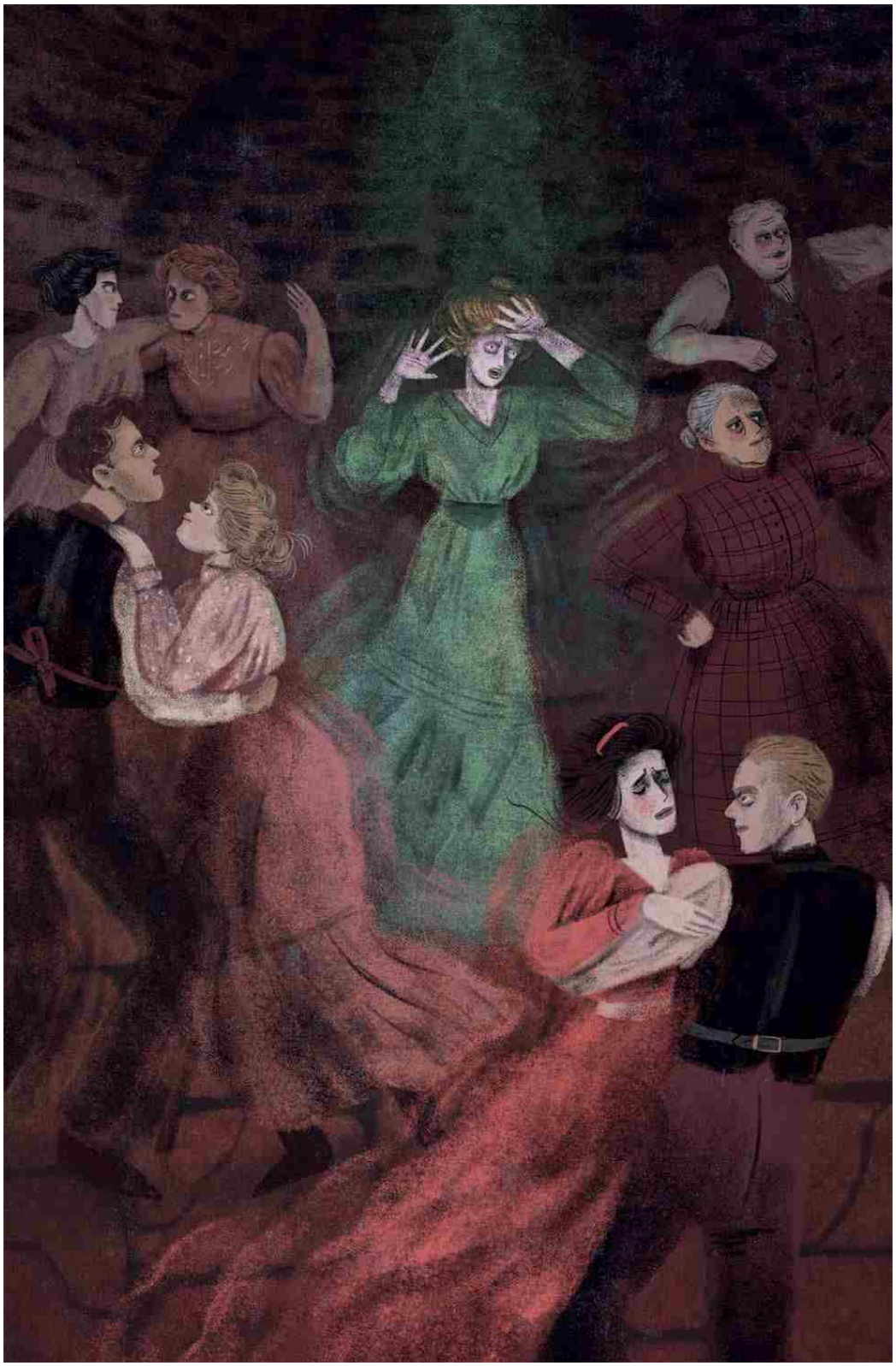
“Please inform me,” Amelia responded and waited curiously for the mayor’s story.

“You hear, Timothy? There are still some people interested in what happened to us many years ago!”

“Otis, for goodness sake, we have no time for family legends now,” Timothy said, trying to cut him off. But the mayor had already pulled his chair closer to Amelia and started his account.

“It is not a legend, miss, it’s a curse!” He leaned closer and continued, almost in a whisper. “It started 50 generations ago, when the news spread that a young man from Wælmoor conversed with spirits during the night. A witch, they called him. Some also saw him sacrifice animals to the marsh, as if it were some kind of god! When they caught him, he denied

everything. It was one of my ancestors who protected the village from this witch. He led the people who lynched him. The witch screamed he was innocent, but to no avail, then he betrayed himself with his last breath. He cursed my ancestor. Ever since then, he returns as a wraith to scare the people living here and take the descendants of his murderer back with him to the moor. Last time, he came for my father, and the same thing happened to my grandfather, too. Both disappeared when they were 36 years old. I am the first one in my family to live to the age of 70!”



“And you’re surprised nobody believes you?” Timothy sneered.

“Wait until I tell you what happened 60 years ago! Then you’ll see why it’s so important to listen to an old man’s stories,” Otis continued and turned back to Amelia. “At the time, my father was the mayor of the village, and I was ten years old. One day we were at the pharmacy which, as you can probably guess, was run by Timothy’s grandfather. My father was browsing through the vials when the bell over the door rang. A hideous creature entered and came closer and closer, bringing the stench of mud and rotting plants. It looked as if it had stepped out of the dark marshy moor. It had pus-covered, oily skin, with peeling bits of flesh and black phlegm dripping from an arm that had burned away to the bone. It was the Wraith King. My father dropped the vial and pulled me behind him. But I recognized a crown of sundew, which circled the Wraith King’s skull. It was searching hungrily with its sticky tentacles for the blackened bits of skin. Don’t look at me like that, Timothy, this is not my imagination! I remember what he told my father as if it was yesterday. His voice was deep and distant as he said, ‘Teo! Fifty generations ago you killed me and threw my body into the waters of the moor. And now I have come to collect what I deserve!’”

“Otis, please! The doctor has come here to help, stop telling her this nonsense!”

“So, am I getting this right …” asked Amelia, ignoring Timothy. “Sixty years ago you actually saw this Wraith King in a physical form?”

“Yes, miss! After the incident, the pharmacy was closed for days because they had to clean up the black goo.”

“And how did it end?” Amelia asked.

“You should rather ask – at what price? A week after the Wraith King told us what he wanted, my father disappeared without trace. We still have no idea what happened to him. Nobody has ever believed me when I told them this story.”

“And have you seen this wraith?”

“Not yet, miss, but their description matches exactly what I saw that day.”

“Dr ban-Cofan, you don’t believe this old fool, do you?” the pharmacist asked.

“Mr Bheidh, we must consider everything. Has your grandfather never told you about this?”

“Never. Though I can quite understand why. You see, now I’m beginning to believe this nonsense, too!” Timothy said exasperated.

“Please,” Amelia asked, “try to remember. You might be able to recall something helpful.”

“Look, my grandfather kept to himself. Toward the end, he didn’t even visit his own daughter. Though my mother was able to raise me alone, she really could have used some help. I don’t think there’s anything I can tell you that would be useful. Unless …”

“Yes?”

“After he died and I took over the pharmacy, I found a notebook of his, but I haven’t bothered to look at it. It’s probably just full of recipes for medicines.”

“Then that’s where we’ll start,” said Amelia. “We need to read that notebook and if it doesn’t lead anywhere, we’ll have to come up with something else. But the first victims may not be able to cope with their sleeplessness much longer.”

They hurried off to the pharmacist’s house. When they arrived, Timothy led them upstairs to the library where Otis collapsed in an armchair. The pharmacist went to the shelves, pushed some thick volumes aside, took a leather-bound book from the top shelf and opened it. Shaking, Timothy reached into his pocket and took out a cigarette. He lit up, inhaled the smoke deeply, then started silently reading, completely absorbed in his grandfather’s writing.

“Mr Barron,” Amelia said impatiently, turning to Otis. “When did your father disappear?”

“On 2 March 1852.”

Amelia gently touched Timothy’s shoulder and gave him a pointed look.

“Just a minute.” He leafed through to see if there was an entry for that date, cleared his throat and started reading out loud. “‘I promised not to tell anyone but I must write this down or it will drive me crazy! I have nightmares every night. Again and again I see the Wraith King entering the pharmacy and coming closer. Then he stops in front of Teo and warns him that he has one week to say farewell to his family …’”

“… ‘and come to lie next to me in the moor!’” Otis finished.

“‘Teo spoke about a curse that had reached his father and grandfather,’” Timothy continued. “‘So we put together a plan to stop the wraith from appearing once and for all. Before the week had passed, we went to the Backwater of the Thousand Stakes, pulled the blackened bodies out of the bog and burned them. The huge flames covered the sky with a dark cloud of smoke. We believed the wraiths would no longer be able to return. I was throwing the last remains on the fire when Teo went back on the shore to check for any remaining bodies among the sundew in the water. Then I heard a shot and found him lying lifeless among the stakes. Teo! What kind of madness got you, my friend?’”

“So that’s how it happened,” Otis sighed. “Go on, please.”

“That was the last entry. On the other side of the page there is a roughly drawn map, and that’s it,” Timothy said, turning the pages back and forth.

“That can’t be all there is. He must have started a new notebook – find it!” the mayor exclaimed.

Amelia watched silently as Otis took the notebook from Timothy’s hand to see for himself. While he pored over the map, she walked over to the foggy window and tried to gather her thoughts. *If they believed the wraiths would not return, why have they appeared in Wælmoor?* she wondered.

Dark shadows floated past outside and one stopped briefly as if to fly at the window, then sped away. Amelia raised her hand to protect herself but the window did not shatter and the fog covered the glass just as densely as before.

She turned back to the others but Timothy and Otis were no longer alone. They were staring in horror at the black wraith floating in the middle of the room. Otis dropped the notebook and Timothy walked backward, bumping into a small table. Though she fought against the urge, Amelia also stepped back in fear of this abomination.

The Wraith King scanned the library, taking everything in. Amelia was terrified. The six-foot tall spectre floated above the ground between Otis and the pharmacist. The dark veil of fog that filled its body whirled sinisterly in the dim light.

While the creature's attention was focused elsewhere, Timothy reached back for the gun lying on the small table. But the wraith snapped to attention and screamed at him. Timothy froze and the Wraith King emitted a deep growl as it floated closer.

"We haven't met, have we?" The Wraith King smelled the air. "Teo!" he said looking at Otis. "Have you taken my sense of smell, too? That's why everything is so strange!"

"Teo?" Amelia asked, then covered her mouth with her hand. But it was too late. The wraith heard and floated toward her until she was backed up against the window.

"Who are you, stranger?" He measured her up. "Answer me!"

"A-Amelia ban-Cofan," she obeyed.

The creature's opaque eyes sparkled. "Ban-Cofan!" he repeated. "The Seer of the Cave of Bones! So do others like me still exist?"

"The Cave of Bones?" Amelia whispered, bewildered.

"I see you can't remember who you really are. But why do you think you can understand what I'm saying? Why aren't you running away from

me in panic like all the others?" he asked but Amelia was unable to say anything.

"Look!" he continued, and his voice softened to an almost human tone as he pointed at the blackened heart pulsing between his ribs. "This is the treasure of the Cave of Bones, which very few can see. But you can. Once, long ago, I used to have the gift as you do. Back then, they called us Druids. We felt every heartbeat of those around us, sometimes even the spirits. Then, we became wizards if respected, or witches if sent to the stake."

"'The healers of the psyche,'" Amelia whispered as she began breathing easier again.

"Psyche? An unnecessary innovation," the creature declared, then raised his finger, drawing a swirling line of fog in the air. "One thing is certain. You, at least, have only forgotten where you come from. But the people of Wælmoor have forgotten that they no longer live their own lives."

"I don't understand?" Amelia asked, and though her lips still trembled with fear, curiosity was slowly overcoming her terror.

"Of course not! But I shall explain. Here, the son of the medicine man became a medicine man himself, then his grandson did, all the way down through the generations until this pharmacist here. Similarly, the ancestors of the barman have been serving drinks in this village for a thousand years. You see, the moor sentenced everyone who had a hand in my death to live the same life over and over again. They have never been able to get rid of this curse. And most of them don't even remember. But Otis –" He glanced over to where the mayor stood trembling. "He is the same as Teo, as Teo is Arland and Arland is Rosa, Rosa is Vidal and Vidal is … shall I go on? Otis killed me fifty generations ago and threw my body into the bog. But the marsh listened to my prayer and fulfilled my wish. When he reaches the age of thirty-six – the age I was when he took my life – I come back to punish him for what he did to me."

“But why do you punish them for something they haven’t done?” Amelia asked.

The Wraith King raised his head and a deep growling rose from his stomach. Slowly, he turned his back to Amelia and floated toward the mayor.

“How you have grown, Otis! I hardly recognize you at this age.” He leaned closer to the elderly gentleman.

The rootlets of his sundew crown, which made a fine web on his skull reached out greedily toward the mayor’s fleshy face.

“Finally, I’m getting my sense of smell back!” The Wraith King pulled the hungry wreath away from the mayor’s face at the last moment. “I hope you enjoyed the extra years your father bought for you. But judgment says it is your time now! You have a week to say farewell to your family, then you’ll come and lie next to me in the bog!”

Otis was shaking in fear, so Amelia plucked up her courage.

“Mr Barron has hurt no one!” she shouted. “What sin could he have committed at the age of ten that would make you wish him dead?”

The Wraith King turned around in the blink of an eye and shot across the room. He moved so fast that Amelia fell to the floor in terror. The ribs above her stretched the skin of the creature’s chest like an umbrella, and the black pounding heart blocked out the light.

“What sin? The sin of the one who first stuck his knife in me! Then, after the moor had sent me back among the living, the one who set the dogs on me to tear me apart. When I woke again, the one who stabbed his sword through my heart, and the one who burned me at the stake so I could never return. Or so he thought! What folly! Did he really think he’d succeed?”

The Wraith King then hung his head and spoke more quietly. “The bog reclaimed my charred bones. I’m here again to remind Otis of the judgment of the moor. As long as Otis lives his father’s life, I will find no rest, either!”

The voice of the Wraith King was so full of pain that Amelia could almost feel the stake they had driven through him pierce her own flesh. She closed her eyes. Then the gun went off and the bullet tore through the black ribs, just missing Amelia and shattering the library window above.

But the Wraith King was not vanquished. His scream turned into a low, menacing growl. His long, black fingers made a beckoning gesture and suddenly another wraith appeared behind Otis, swimming into the room through the bookcase. A bony hand appeared on the window frame next to Amelia’s head, and soon the room was full of swirling black wraiths. One went straight toward Otis, who dropped his gun and fell to the ground.

“Otis!” the Wraith King bellowed. “It is your turn now. And because of your actions, you will now only be granted one day to say goodbye. One day, Otis! Don’t forget!”

The wraiths flew out through the window. Before leaving, their king stopped and looked back at Amelia. “I used to have beautiful hazel eyes, too. Be careful! Some people thank you with a stake when you look into their hearts!”

Then he disappeared through the window into the foggy night.

Amelia came to her senses when she heard Timothy call out to the mayor. She ran to Otis but he pushed her away.

“Leave me alone!” he shouted, then reached for his cane, stood up and turned away.

“Doctor, what just happened?” Timothy asked, bemused.

Amelia had no idea how to answer. She couldn’t begin to grasp what they had experienced, but she knew they would not be able to find a rational explanation.

“Don’t worry, everything’s all right now!” she lied, trying to convince herself.

“For how long? A day? That thing said …” Timothy started, but Amelia interrupted him, as Otis’s face turned white with shock.

“Don’t think of it now.”

Otis turned angrily toward them. “You heard what he said! I have one day before I have to kill myself in the bog. One day!”

“I don’t believe a word of this hallucination and you shouldn’t either!” Amelia turned to the pharmacist. “Help me, please!”

“Otis, the doctor is right, this is complete nonsense! We can’t let an apparition take control of us!”

“Trust me, sir,” Amelia continued, trying to speak as gently to Otis as she could. “Such strong hallucinations can only be caused by chemicals. The fog that has settled on the town must have brought some bog gases with it. That is the only explanation for what has happened.”

Otis looked at Amelia doubtfully, pointing his cane at her. “I don’t believe you! But if you are right, the Backwater of the Thousand Stakes will be empty!”

“Otis, please,” Timothy interrupted. “We don’t even know which backwater that is.”

“The one your grandfather drew in the map, you idiot!” With that he took the notebook and opened it. He muttered to himself about rivers and

the letters W and M, turning the notebook around before exclaiming triumphantly, “Ha! You see? Now the direction of the river is right. The M for Mille, not a W for Wælmoor!”

“Mille! The Backwater of the Thousand Stakes!” Amelia said.

“We can’t put our faith in a faded old drawing,” concluded Timothy. “One he read upside down, too.”

“Mr Bheidh!” Amelia replied sternly, then turned to Otis. “Sir, if that makes sense to you, let’s see if we can find anything there.”

The mayor nodded, turning his back to the others while he pulled something out of his pocket, then quickly stuffed it back, along with the notebook. Departing in haste, they lit a lantern for the journey and set off.

As Otis hurried on ahead toward the Mille backwater, Timothy confronted Amelia. “Dr ban-Cofan, do you really believe that what we saw was a mere hallucination? I’ll be honest with you – it seemed so real to me!”

Amelia motioned him to be silent, then answered in a whisper, “It doesn’t matter what we think. Our duty is to help the people of Wælmoor, and right now it’s the mayor who is in the gravest danger.”

“The gun!” Timothy exclaimed.

“You saw he had it in his pocket too? Whether it was a hallucination or not, Mr Barron has experienced a trauma that has distorted his judgment. We have to tread carefully around him!”

“All right, but what do you think happened?”

Amelia considered how to answer. Seeing the worry on Timothy’s face, she leaned closer to him. “Look, such things do not exist. But equally, we could not all have hallucinated the same thing. I can’t explain it, but I think what we saw was …”

“Come, we’re almost there!” the mayor’s deep voice interrupted her, and they hurried after him, Amelia’s thought unfinished.

Otis waited for them, then gave the lantern to Timothy to consult the map on how far they still had to go.

“Two hundred steps more.” He pointed at the path that disappeared among the reeds and they continued on.

They were now quite far from Wælmoor, and the lights of the night sky became clearer behind the veil of fog. Suddenly, Amelia and Timothy found themselves on the shore of the backwater. Tentacles of sundew stretched toward them from the bottom of the stakes, seemingly waiting for their next victim.

Otis! Amelia thought, suddenly sensing that the mayor was stood behind them, pointing the gun at her. She turned around slowly and took Timothy’s arm so that they would not scare him with a sudden movement.

Otis was walking toward them on the path, never taking his eyes off Amelia. He was clenching his cane with his left hand and the gun with the right. A drop of sweat trickled down from his temple as he stopped a few feet away from them.

“Mr Barron, please put down the gun.” Amelia said.

She kept one arm in front of Timothy and reached out with the other to try to take the gun from Otis’ trembling hand.

“I won’t end up like my father!” Otis said and took another step toward them, forcing them back to the edge of the marsh.

“Then don’t repeat what he did! Don’t become a murderer!” Amelia pleaded, but Otis shook his head.

“My father was stupid! The moor wants a victim, so I’ll provide one!” he shouted, steadying the gun and moving his finger toward the trigger.

In that split second, Timothy pushed Amelia away and the bullet hit him instead, going clean through his arm. Otis aimed the gun directly at him, but before he could fire again, the tentacles of sundew broke out of the water, pushed Timothy away and reached toward the gun.

The mayor fired, but the tentacles grabbed his fleshy fingers and pulled him into the marsh water. Otis tried to fight free, but to no avail. In a few seconds he had disappeared among the thick, greedy tendrils. Soon all that could be seen in the oily waves was the top of his cane sticking out like an ornate stake.

Amelia was shocked by the horrific sight and kept watching the whirling underwater until Timothy's voice dragged her eyes away and she turned toward him. He was holding his wounded arm and could not stop the bleeding. Amelia examined the wound – the bullet had gone straight through his arm without touching the bone. She took off her scarf and used it as a bandage.

"Thank you!" the pharmacist said. "Are you all right?"

Amelia nodded as she monitored the bleeding. The makeshift tourniquet seemed to be working. "Let's get away from here."

They walked back along the moonlit path in silence. All the shutters were closed in Wælmoor; the whole village was sound asleep. When they reached the pharmacist's home, Timothy let Amelia treat his wound. He sat down, pale from the loss of blood and showed Amelia a picture of a young woman in a flowery dress and straw hat. She was stood in front of the marshlands.

"That's my mother," he said. "She told me not long before her death that Otis was raised by my grandfather after his father disappeared. He grew up with my mother and they were together for a time. But she never told him I was his son. She only told me a couple of years ago. But it's good that I know." Amelia was not sure whether it was her tiredness, but Timothy's eyes suddenly seemed to sparkle like it was springtime and full of the promise of summer.

"You know, doctor, Wælmoor has always been my home, and I would have lived out my life here, had I not found out what is in store for me. Did the wraith say thirty-six? That's only six more years! It passes in a few

moments in a dark, foggy place like this village. Don’t misunderstand me, I like Wælmoor. But here you can end up bitter and twisted and all that’s left is the Reedmace and the sound of the gramophone.” Timothy gave a long, deep sigh, then his face brightened, as if the fog had lifted. “Six years, though, doctor! Six wonderful years!”

“You need to rest now!” Amelia said and ushered him toward the stairs. Timothy nodded but the sparkle did not disappear from his eyes.

Amelia stayed in the guestroom to be close if he needed her, but quickly fell asleep. When she woke the next morning and pulled back the curtains, bright sunshine flooded the room. Birds were singing, something she never imagined hearing in Wælmoor.

She found Timothy in the kitchen, boiling eggs.

“Good morning,” the pharmacist greeted her. “Breakfast is almost ready.”

“Thank you.” Amelia smiled. “How is your arm?”

“I can hardly feel it, the morphine worked.”

“And what about …” she started but did not know how to mention Otis.

“There is nothing to talk about. I didn’t mind my mother not telling Otis who I was. He was never kind to anyone. What happened yesterday … I still can’t believe he would have killed you!”

“You saved my life! But what happens if in six years …” Amelia started but the pharmacist interrupted her.

“Let’s have breakfast and then see whether the nightmare in the village is over,” he suggested, and Amelia was amazed to see how cheerful he was.

After breakfast they visited the wraith’s victims and were glad to learn that everyone had slept soundly. Even Lily, the last person they saw run

away from the Reedmace, was fast asleep on her sofa when they peeped through her cottage window.

It was soon time for Amelia to bid Timothy goodbye and set off on the journey home. What had happened the night before seemed so long ago, yet she could not stop wondering what would happen in six years' time. Would the nightmare end? Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of creaking wheels and there was Chestnut trotting along with his owner whistling on the cart.

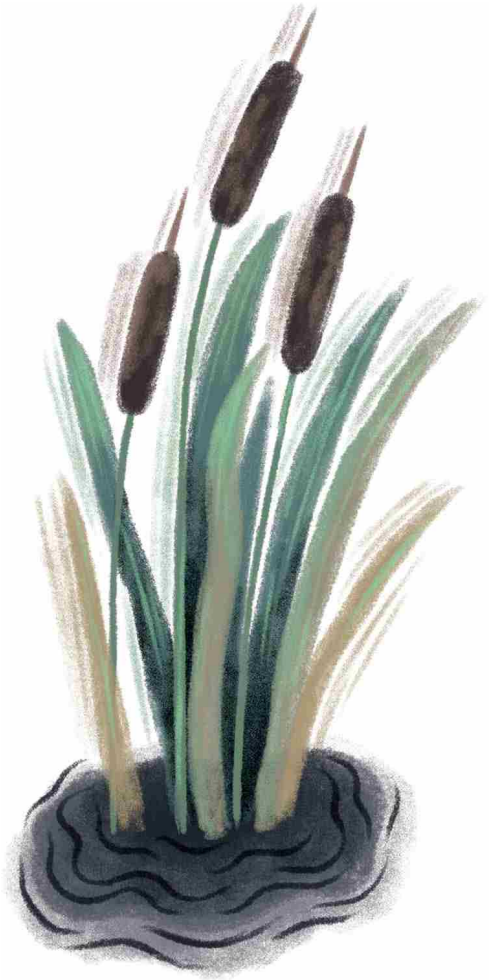
"Miss!" called the old farmer with a wide smile, stopping the cart next to her. "Did you find what you were looking for in that fog?"

"Yes, I did! Could I trouble you for another ride?" Amelia asked, smiling as Chestnut rubbed his wet nose against her face.

"Gladly! Hop on!" He whistled to Chestnut and the cart set off again.

"Can I tell you something?" he asked Amelia. "This morning, the first thing I did was look for a new whip. But when I entered the stable and heard Chestnut neigh, I said to myself, to hell with that! If this animal can greet me so cheerfully after such an exhausting day, I'll give him a chance and go without. And you know what, you were right! He's pulling the cart better than ever before!"

The farmer's upbeat mood gave Amelia hope – if he could put down his whip after so many years, then maybe the curse was indeed broken. Perhaps the dead could now rest in peace, and the people of Wælmoor could finally start living.



V

Mesmerizers

AMELIA MET TIMOTHY ONCE MORE, before he started on his journey – full of hope – to find himself. “Bheidh” means “trust.” Hope and trust are also the key words for the next story, which, exceptionally, will be about me.

But before we get to that, we must learn about witches who can mesmerize even the strongest of people with their hypnotic gaze and render them helpless so they do whatever the witch wants. A mesmerizer knows that nothing is what it seems and is ready to exploit the fact that most of us forget this simple truth. When they offer you cake, it will be delicious poison – and never drink what they pour into your cup! When asked a question, they respond with another question and when telling your fortune, they lie. Or maybe not? The soul of a mesmerizer is clouded by a fog that always hides something nobody but them knows. It’s time to meet some of them in the fifth chapter of the most ancient volume in the Corpus Corvorum!

Koschei the Deathless

TYPE sorcerer

AREA Eastern Europe

POWERS immortality

TALE Koschei the Deathless is the evil sorcerer of Russian fairy tales. He even manages to trick death. He hides his soul in a needle, hides the needle in an egg, the egg in a duck, the

duck in a hare. He then closes the hare inside a chest and buries it on a mysterious island, which disappears from the eyes of mortals at high tide.

Marya Morevna, the warrior princess, manages to capture Koschei, but the evil sorcerer only spends about ten years chained in her dungeons before he escapes with another trick. When Marya Morevna goes to war, she leaves the country in the hands of her new husband Ivan but makes him promise never to set foot in the highest tower of the castle. Overcome by curiosity, Ivan enters Koschei's prison in the tower. The emaciated prisoner asks for water; Ivan feels sorry for him and grants his request. Three sips of water are enough to allow the evil sorcerer to tear off his chains, turn into a whirlwind and fly out of the window of the tower.

Count Alessandro di Cagliostro

TYPE masonic magician, alchemist

AREA Western Europe

LIVED 2 June 1743–26 August 1795

TALE A mere charlatan or a magician who tried to rejuvenate the world? Count Cagliostro is a true enigma – he was born in Sicily under the name Giuseppe Balsamo, and almost all the information we have about his life comes from his enemies. He traveled to Egypt and Persia, where he learnt forgery and the making of elixirs. He became really popular in Paris but his name was connected with the scandalous attempted jewellery theft known as the Affair of the Diamond Necklace, which involved Queen Marie Antoinette. After that he was exiled from France.

In England he joined the Ancients of the Freemasons and is said to have learned Cabbalistic knowledge from the Baal Shem of London himself. It was here that he created his Egyptian Rite, with a goal no less than the spiritual rejuvenation of Europe. He wanted to create his own masonic lodge, which – contrary to the customs of the time – would also have admitted women. However, he faced fierce opposition, so he did not succeed.

After it seemed that nobody was interested in spiritual rejuvenation, he unexpectedly received an invitation to Rome. Cagliostro traveled there, but after his arrival he was detained, and the Inquisition sentenced him to death for heresy. However, his sentence was changed to a

lifetime in prison after the intervention of a mysterious stranger …

La Tunda

TYPE mythical creature

AREA the coast of Colombia and Ecuador

POWERS seduction

TALE Stories going back to the 16th century and the time of Spanish colonization, describe La Tunda as a disgusting woman with a repulsive odour. She has dark brown, bulging eyes, her body is rotting, and she wanders in the rainforest in ragged clothes. She uses the night to look for her victims – straying children and unfaithful men. To children, she appears in the shape of their mother; to men, as an attractive young woman. But her disguise is never complete as one of her legs stays as a *molinillo* – a wooden whisk used to stir hot chocolate and other drinks. If the victim does not notice this telltale sign, they will be mesmerized by La Tunda, who will feed the victim shrimps to keep them in an enchanted state. She eats the children and the men become her lovers – she sucks their blood during their encounters.

However, others maintain that La Tunda is demonized by her oppressors, and she is really a protective, liberating force.

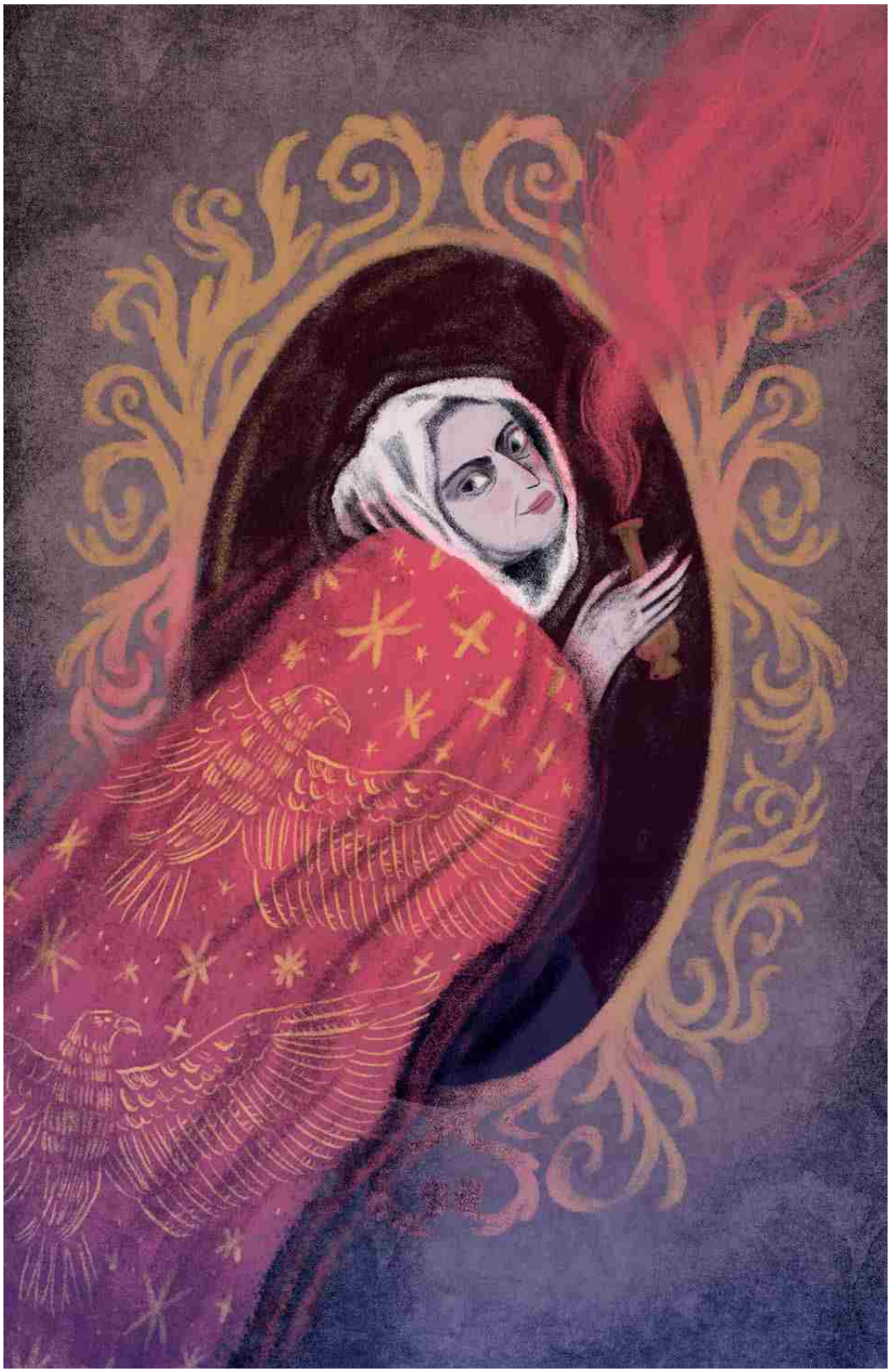
Roggenmuhme

TYPE *Feldgeist* or field spirit

AREA Germany

POWERS replacing children with changelings

TALE Roggenmuhme or Rye Aunt is a field spirit who lives between the roots of rye and other crops at night and roams the golden fields during the day. She throws her long, hanging breasts full of tar over her shoulders and runs between the furrows like a galloping horse. When people think they see her, it is a sign of a good crop, and they always leave her some cereal, so she does not get hungry after the harvest. But one should be careful with her. If she comes across a child who is picking cornflowers, she captures them and sends home a changeling in their place. She hides her prey under her skirt, takes them with her between the roots and there she presses them to her iron heart and feeds them fiery tar. The parents can try to get their child back – but first they must realize what Roggenmuhme has done …



Catherine Monvoisin

TYPE poisoner

AREA Paris, France

LIVED *c.*1640–22 February 1680

TALE Catherine Monvoisin, better known as “La Voisin,” was a French fortune-teller and poisoner, whose activities caused the death of over 1,000 people. She was hired by the most influential aristocrats at the royal court in France despite being a contradictory figure. She helped induce abortions at a time when women did not have the right to choose. At the same time she was the head of an extensive network of fortune-tellers that offered poisons, aphrodisiacs and black masses to those who could afford its prices.

Even Madame de Montespan, official royal mistress of King Louis XIV, hired La Voisin to perform a ceremony so that the king would never love anyone but her. Madame de Montespan lay down as a human altar with a bowl on her chest, into which the priest celebrating the black mass is said to have let the blood of an infant. When Louis XIV chose another lover, instead of holding La Voisin accountable, Montespan asked her to poison the king. But the attempt failed and her network was eventually closed down. This was the famous Affair of the Poisons, which led to La Voisin being sentenced to death for witchcraft.

Matinta Perera

TYPE witch

AREA Brazil

POWERS deception, bringing bad luck

TALE Matinta Perera, the witch of Brazilian folklore, turns into a barn owl by night and flies onto the roof of a house when she senses somebody is dying. She harasses the vulnerable inhabitants with her ceaseless screeching until they promise to make her an offering of tobacco, coffee, alcohol or fish. The next day she returns to the house in her human form as a hag dressed in a black cloak to collect the goods offered. If she does not get what she has been promised, she brings bad luck to the inhabitants, such as making their crops rot.

When she senses her own death nearing, Matinta Perera goes from house to house and asks everybody: “Do you want it?” If she meets a greedy woman who answers “Yes” without knowing what she is offering, she passes the curse onto her and the woman then becomes the next Matinta Perera owl witch.

Yukinba

TYPE *yokai* or supernatural being

AREA Japan

POWERS deceptive cry for help

TALE Crunching steps break the silence in the snow-covered forest so Yukinba hides behind a rock. She waits for the wayfarer to get closer. With immaculate timing, she cries loudly and, as always, perfectly imitates the cry of an old

woman who needs help. The wayfarer quickens his steps and Yukinba gets ready to attack. Her single leg tenses as the enormous head growing out of her thigh pounces on the victim. Her huge mouth waters and her sharp teeth tear into the flesh of the lonesome wayfarer.

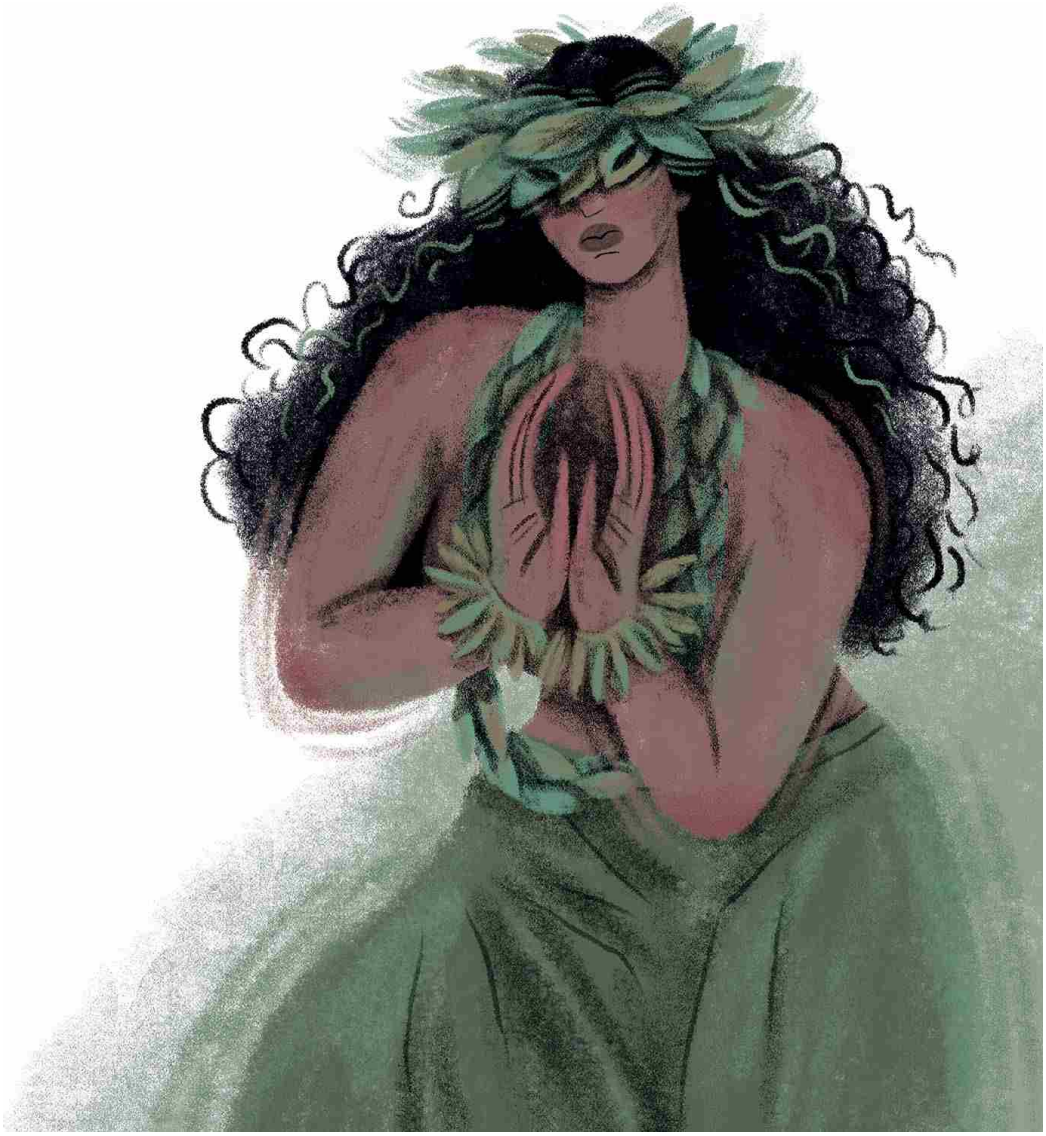
Kapo

TYPE goddess

AREA Hawaii

POWERS combating sexual predators

TALE Kapo is the Hawaiian goddess of fertility, sorcery and dark powers. When Kamapua’a, the hog-man, covets her sister and will not stop pursuing her, Kapo detaches her vagina and flings it across the sky after them. When the decoy passes Kamapua’a’s face, he cannot resist the temptation and follows it. Kapo’s feminine charm lures him away from her sister to the island of O’ahu, where it finally lands leaving an imprint that is still visible as the volcanic crater of Kohelepelepe. By the time Kamapua’a reaches the island, Kapo has already called back her flying vagina to remain under her skirt.



Yuki-onna

TYPE yokai or supernatural being

AREA Japan

POWERS turning into fog or snow

TALE Yuki-onna, the Snow Woman, holds her baby tight and keeps trudging through the blizzard. Her kimono freezes rigid and her black hair turns white with the snow. She

walks on until she comes across a lone traveler. When she catches up with him, she asks him to take the baby for a short time to warm it up with the heat of his body and stop it crying. The traveler obliges and Yuki-onna waits patiently until the infant has sucked out all the heat and the traveler’s frozen body is covered with snow.

Bakeneko

TYPE *yokai* or supernatural being

AREA Japan

POWERS dancing on hind legs, transforming into a human

TALE The cat has been a witch's best friend for at least 10,000 years but even we have yet to fully understand its mysterious nature. Old, experienced cats are easy to recognize from their torn ears and other battle scars. If one lives to be 13 years old, it might turn into a *bakeneko*, which can be recognized by its huge size, extra-long tail and supernatural powers. These creatures can walk on their hind legs and like to dance with a scarf on their head in the light of an oil lamp. They learn to speak human words and can take on the shape of their master, misleading even the master's close relatives. If a *bakeneko's* master is killed, it will take revenge on the murderer. But if the master treats it badly, it will retaliate for the ill treatment it has suffered.

Mary Bateman

TYPE trickster

AREA North Yorkshire, England

LIVED *c.*1768–20 March 1809

TALE Mary Bateman, also known as the Yorkshire Witch, became well-known in 18th-century England because of her scams and deceptions. She claimed she could tell the

future and perform miracles, when she was a simple thief and confidence trickster. Due to her series of thefts, she and her husband had to move house several times to avoid being caught. Mary's most famous trick involved a prophetic hen, which she claimed laid eggs that contained messages about the end of the world. But a doctor grew suspicious because of a misspelled word of the prophecy. He unveiled that it was Bateman herself who wrote the messages on the eggs and then pushed them back into the poor hen. She made locals pay a few pennies to see this "miracle" before she was found out. Bateman never gave up on easy ways to earn money and eventually she was caught and hanged for her crimes, which included thefts, forgeries and murder with poison.

After her execution, her body was exhibited publicly so that all could see the Yorkshire Witch. In a twist of fate, others were able to cash in on her fame, as people who wanted to see her body had to pay three pennies each. There was so much interest that her skin was tanned to make a profit. It was sold as a souvenir and is said to have been used to bind two books, which were lost in the mid-19th century.

Crist is coming

WE HAVE REACHED the first major obstacle on our alchemical journey. If we make the same mistake as The Emperor did and focus solely on the physical world, we may think that we have learned everything we need to know and we are in complete control of our lives. But as long as we hold this erroneous belief, we are just like the victims of mesmerizers. In fact, we have reached the deepest point of the *nigredo* or "blackness" phase of alchemy. We live in the state of *putrefaction* or decay in undisturbed silence and may not even be aware of this. It is extremely difficult to escape the illusion of the material world, especially when we have no one to help us. But even if we are in this mesmerized state, something – or someone – might trigger the step of *congelation* or crystallization within us. This can happen when we least expect it, and those who become aware of the mirage of the physical world are lucky. However, none of us has enough willpower to break out of this illusion on our own – this time we must rely on someone else.

Help comes in the shape of The Pope, the fifth card in the Major Arcana. But beware – he can be a spiritual leader who stretches out his hand and pulls you out of the dark pit of *putrefaction*, or a trickster who only pretends to help you. Now we know each other well enough so I can tell you – I used to be a trickster, too. That's why I can see things only they can see, and that's why I know so much about the art of deception. But I gave up tricking people quite early, because when you get your shadow stolen, you re-evaluate things. Let me tell you my own story, which happened when I was a pickpocket.

The Thief of Shadows

IT'S NOT OFTEN that someone has their shadow stolen but that's exactly what happened to me when I was seventeen. I had nobody but Fuzz to help me get it back. While we thankfully succeeded, I also recovered something far more precious along the way that I thought I'd lost forever.

The town I lived in with Fuzz and the others who had been in the circus, provided us with everything we needed, if we were smart enough to steal it. Of course we never stole from locals, only traveling merchants selling their wares in the street market in front of the town hall.

That fateful day, I had put on my green coat with golden embroidery to attract the vendors' attention. The flamboyant outfit worked; as I walked down the street, they stared at me with interest. Fuzz followed me under the arches behind the sellers' stalls, silently approaching the one we had picked out. At times I wished we could trade places but a hairy zei'zei would have looked very strange in a green coat, not to mention that most people would have thought he was someone's pet monkey and paid him little attention.

The seller we had targeted was a cloth merchant, who looked particularly bored leaning back in his chair behind a table of colourful fabrics. I joined some girls sorting through silk gloves while I eyed them as if I was an expert. I even sneered at the cheaper gloves but praised the more expensive materials, to signal to him that I was a serious customer. I didn't have to wait long before he walked over to me.

"Can I help you, young man?" he asked.

“I’m from the circus – you must have heard about us – we arrived yesterday,” I answered, pretending to be an errand boy.

“From the circus?” he replied, his interest piqued. “And what do you need? New costumes, gloves, hats …?” He motioned to the table, and I gladly examined each piece he showed me to give Fuzz enough time to creep up behind him.

“The ringmaster has a more serious request but you might not be able to fulfil it,” I said. “We are looking for a new costume for the elephant. But Nightingale is very choosy – she won’t go into the ring in any old rags!”

With this, I secured his full attention. He hurriedly threw the cheaper fabrics aside and laid the most ornate roll in front of me. He smoothed it out and started explaining the special embroidery, oblivious that a hairy little hand was reaching out to take the purse from his belt and substituting it with a bag of pebbles.

Fuzz raised the loot up in the air and covered his mouth with his hand, but he couldn’t resist a short, subdued laugh. The last thing we needed was to get caught, or for him to say something and have people realize he could talk. I held my breath. Thankfully, the merchant didn’t notice and Fuzz ran off with the money.

“Well? What do you think?” the merchant said.

“My goodness, what’s this smell? It stinks of vermin!” I said loud enough for the girls looking at the gloves to hear, then leaned closer to the fabric and pulled away, wrinkling my nose. “Well, Nightingale certainly wouldn’t wear this!”

I turned my back on the merchant as if offended and then quickly melted into the crowd before he could realize he’d been tricked. I glanced back quickly at the girls, only to see the disgust on their faces as they sniffed the fabrics. I allowed myself a quick smile.

Of course, the merchant had no idea that not long ago there really had been a traveling circus in town. Or that a terrible night two years ago there

had been a fire and much of it had burned down. I tried not to think about that painful time. Instead, I focused on catching up with Fuzz. Together, we rushed through the streets until we got to Sunflower Square. In the Rumble Café we could always get a table. We loved this secluded place.

“Nightingale?” Fuzz asked me as we sat down on the terrace. “Cool name. A pity we never had an elephant.”

“We could still have one!” I answered, weighing the pouch he passed me in my hand.

“Oh, sure. That’d take all our money.”

“A few more jobs like this and we’ll be able to buy one!” I answered.

Fuzz smiled and leafed through the menu as if he could read. The nice young waiter who came over to us greeted the little zei’zei. This was why we loved the Rumble so much! All were welcome – men and monkey alike.

We had just received our food and I was ready to eat when Fuzz nudged me.

“Look, there’s Bruin!” He nodded toward the heavy-set young man approaching under the balconies of Sunflower Square.

Bruin had been the strongman in the circus but he was the meekest guy we knew. He and his girlfriend Scylla, the juggler, were the only ones besides us who stayed in town after the fire. The other members of the troupe had quickly dispersed. We really liked Bruin but we wished he hadn’t got together with Scylla. She was like an octopus – she threw knives as if she had eight arms and sucked the strength out of Bruin as if she had tentacles. But recently even he was fed up with her vain and selfish ways and could hardly wait to get away.

Bruin reached the Rumble and spoke with our waiter. We noticed they seemed awkwardly shy around each other. Seeing us, Bruin walked quickly over before providing yet another excuse for not joining – something about an errand for Scylla – then hurried away.

We bolted our lunch, then sat watching passers-by. As the midday sun lit the town, there were fewer and fewer people around, until everyone had disappeared from under the arches. A covered wagon pulled by an ox appeared in the square. The cart was almost the size of our cabin! The coachman was a pale merchant in a wide-rimmed black hat. He seemed familiar, but I didn't know why – I had met so many like him over the years. Fuzz took a keen interest in the wagon as it got closer.

"Don't even think about it," I said before he could start scheming. "I'm so full I can't move."

"Do you want an elephant or don't you? Look at that wagon! I wonder what he's selling," he whispered as the merchant passed by. "We could easily get in the back – there's loads of room under that tarpaulin …" He pointed at the back of the cart and before I could say anything, he had jumped up from his chair to sneak after the merchant.

I sighed but followed him because I knew he was right – we couldn't afford to miss a catch like this. We leapt onto the back of the wagon and entered under the cover. Instantly, we found ourselves among incredible treasures. Velvet-covered music boxes were lined up on a finely carved table, its drawer handle fashioned as a snake's head with eyes made of ruby. Above the table was a stuffed caiman, its nose hitting the tarpaulin as the cart turned out of Sunflower Square. And a hand-painted map, on which the tentacles of a giant squid were crushing a ship. A black line crossed the land, connecting many cities. I wondered how many times this man had travelled round the world. Could I have actually seen him here before? Fuzz bumped into me, stopping my musing, the ruby-eyed snake handle in his hand.

"Shh!" I warned him, but he shrugged and carried on rummaging through the drawer.

I moved deeper into the wagon. There were all kinds of odds and ends thrown into a pile and a large cupboard covered with a red curtain. I pulled

back the curtain to see lots of thick books with strange signs on their spines. I tried to read them, but they were in a language I couldn't understand. It felt like being in a wizard's library! On the middle shelf between some huge volumes was an obsidian dish containing a crystal ball, glittering among the cobwebs. It was perfectly clean and spherical. I just had to hold it! *Could you get an elephant for such a big crystal?* I wondered and tucked it in my pocket. There was just enough space for it next to the tarot deck my mother had given me, but it weighed down my pocket. I was used to this, though – on our best days, my pockets could get very heavy.

On the shelf above the books stood some huge bottles. I stepped onto a crate to get a better look at them. But the bottles were opaque, with something black and viscous inside. I leaned in closer to one of them, hoping to get a glimpse through the gooey material. Suddenly the dark contents shuddered as if whatever was inside had seen me. It changed into various shapes and finally a face stared back at me.

I was so startled I fell off the crate. Of course, Fuzz just giggled. Then something rattled and he looked up from the table. A holey cloth next to the bookshelf fell on the floor, a crooked beak poking out through a huge copper cage, followed by a pale face and a dewlap. A vul'rah. Its red eyes lit up, then it opened its black wings and made a deafening screech. It shook the door of the cage with so much force that we ran. Fuzz left behind everything except the snake's head and we jumped off the wagon just as the ox slowed down.

We didn't stop running until we reached the edge of town.

"What kind of merchant keeps a vul'rah? And in a cage, too!" Fuzz puffed.

"What do you think he feeds it?"

Fuzz' hair bristled in disgust. "I don't want to know …"

We headed toward the deserted quarry – a half-circle carved into the mountain, a perfect backdrop for the circus. "It's close to the town but not

too close," the ringmaster had reasoned. "Once they've made their way here, they will definitely buy a ticket!" And he was right. We were really popular with the locals. Had the circus not burned down, we would have held many performances there.

Now, only scorched pieces of the once-colourful tents remained, along with some burned barrels and two cabins – one occupied by Bruin and Scylla and the other by Fuzz and I. We lost a great deal that night – all the animals escaped and my own mother disappeared. Several people saw her running toward the dunes in the wilderness but in all the turmoil no one knew where she went. We searched for her for weeks to no avail.

I never gave up hope – I roamed far and wide in the sandy wastelands but found nothing except the tracks of merchants' carts. Fuzz knew very well it wasn't an elephant that I needed. My plan was to collect enough money, then travel until I found Mum.

"Scylla is talking to herself again," Fuzz said, as we walked past her shack, peeking in. "She's gazing into her mirror again too. She spends way too much time looking at herself. When are we going to leave her and Bruin and go, like the others?" he asked.

Fuzz was eager to leave, but I couldn't give up the search for Mum.

"Let's see how much we've collected today!" I suggested, changing the subject as we headed into our cabin.

It felt good to find shelter from the midday sun behind the curtains of our little shack. Fuzz jumped onto his hammock, examined the snake's head, then got a knife and started poking at the ruby eyes. I sat down on the velvet-covered sofa and took the crystal ball out of my pocket. I marvelled again at its clarity. As I looked through it, Fuzz looked even more ridiculous than usual: I saw him upside down, with elongated ears and thinning arms. Suddenly strange letters appeared. I dropped the ball into my lap but the symbols continued to show on the crystal. They looked the same as those I'd seen on the pale man's books. They glowed purple as if the ball wasn't

really transparent at all. Then, with a flash of light, a crack appeared, dividing the crystal into two identical halves, and the same light shone out from the crack. Now even Fuzz took notice. The two halves looked as though you could turn them along the crack but I didn't dare move it.

"What are you waiting for? There might be something inside. Are you afraid a vul'rah will fly out of it?"

I shook my head, though he wasn't wrong. I plucked up the courage and turned the two halves. The crystal started vibrating and became cold, before covering the cabin in purple light. It was as if I was holding a tiny sun. Now I was certain we had found a valuable prize! I was overcome with joy but then Fuzz jumped out of his hammock and threw his blanket over the crystal, extinguishing the light.

"Ssh! He might be able to hear us!"

"Who?"

"Look, your shadow!" he whispered and lifted the corner of the blanket carefully, just enough to let me see what had frightened him.

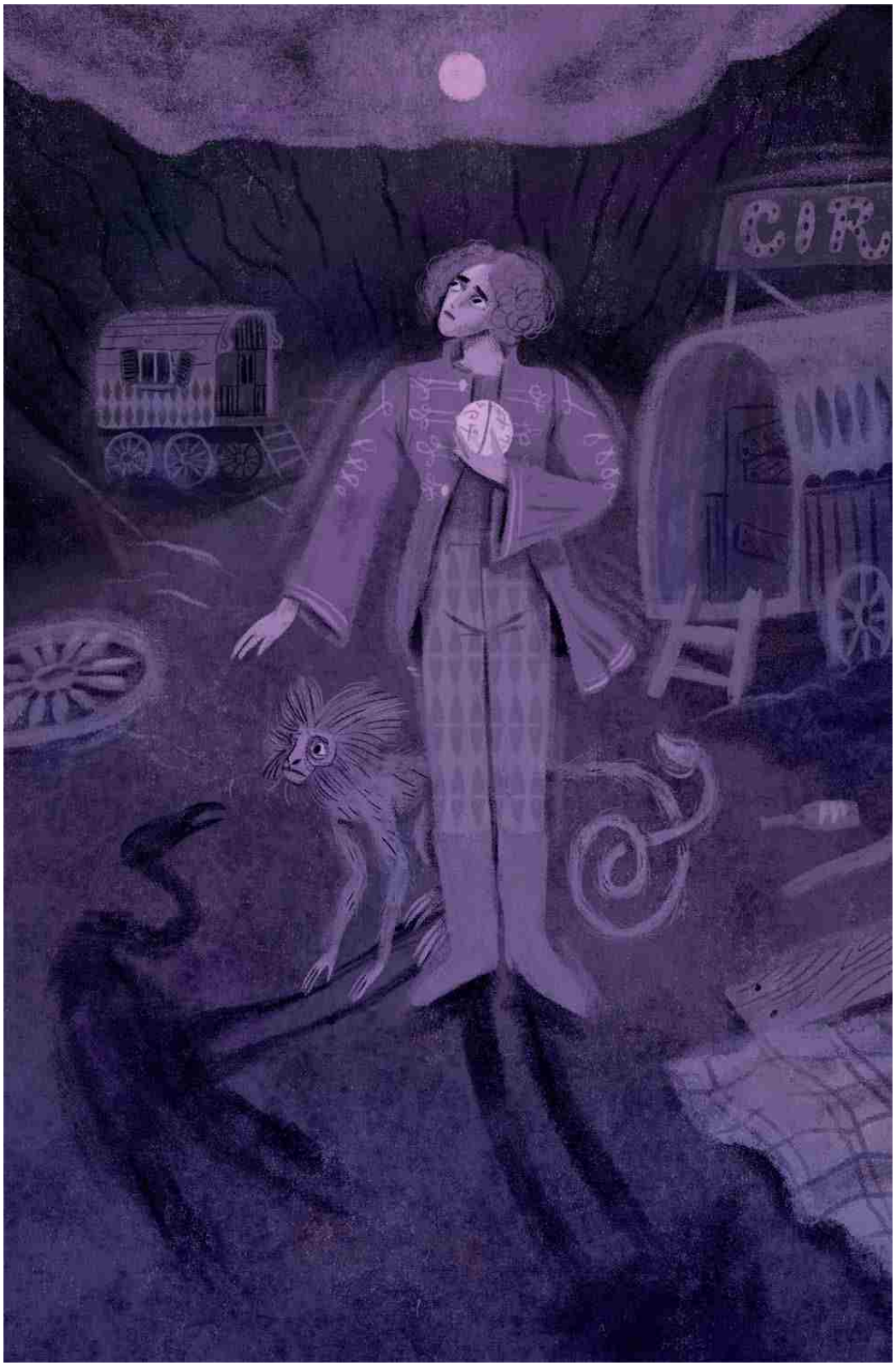
The bright purple light threw the cabin back into shadows. Just behind me instead of my own silhouette, there was the shadow of the pale man in a hat. I was confused but then the strange shadow moved along the wall. My hand started reaching for the blanket involuntarily, pulling me so hard that I could barely resist. I looked at Fuzz in terror and he immediately covered the ball again, dispersing the shadows. My hand fall back into my lap.

"Oh my goodness!" I whispered, then quickly wrapped the blanket tightly round the ball until its light had almost disappeared. I threw it into the corner.

"What shall we do now?" Fuzz asked.

"No idea! Do you think he knows where we are?"

"I don't think so. But maybe we should find Bruin for help? Not even a vul'rah would mess with him," he said and moved toward the door.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I bent down toward the crystal ball and folded the remaining corner of the blanket over it before I picked it up. I could see nothing through the cover but as soon as Fuzz opened the door, the cabin filled again with the strange light. The sun itself was shining purple in the sky and its strange rays painted the white walls of the quarry in amethyst. As far as my eyes could see, everything was immersed in this weird light, even the small zei'zei.

"Fuzz!" I pointed behind him.

"No way!" he said when he saw the shadow of the vul'rah growing upward from his feet. The bird tried to attack him but couldn't reach further than the sand.

I hadn't lost the merchant's shadow either. I had no idea what to do.

"Turn it back!" Fuzz shouted.

I quickly unfolded the crystal from the blanket, then turned it left and right. But the light didn't go out, nor did the sun regain its golden hue. It was clear that we wouldn't be able to end the spell on our own.

I put the crystal ball back in my pocket and this time the alien shadow didn't try to stop me. It was as if the pale merchant was simply watching what I was doing. Fuzz, on the other hand, was fighting against his new shadow. Every time he tried to take a step toward me, the shadow pulled him back. But the little zei'zei was more than a match for the vul'rah. He dragged the shadow back and forth until it was exhausted by the fight and Fuzz was able to move freely again.

"What a nightmare!" he panted.

"Let's see if Scylla has been affected!"

Looking in through her window, we could see Scylla still staring at herself in the mirror, oblivious to what was happening.

"That's not fair! She kept her shadow!" Fuzz whispered.

"At least we don't have to worry about her. Let's find Bruin!"

Walking toward the town, our eyes slowly got used to the unnaturally-clad landscape, but it still felt like a different world. The leaves on the trees were various shades of purple instead of dark green and the houses took on a strange hue. At the dried-up creek we met Bruin, who was walking toward us from the town, covered in crystalline light.

“Are you guys okay? Do you know what the hell is going on? The whole town …” he babbled.

“Yeah, it’s horrible,” Fuzz interrupted, as if we had nothing to do with what had happened.

“Gosh, Fuzz, what on earth is that?” He pointed to the zei’zei’s shadow. “A vulture?”

“Even worse, a vul’rah!”

“Seems I was lucky then,” Bruin said, pointing at his own thin shadow. “Hey, have you seen Scylla?”

“Don’t worry, she’s all right. She’s in the cabin, we’ve just seen her,” I said.

“You left her there by herself? I’ve got to run home!” he gasped and ran on toward the quarry.

“So much for our bodyguard,” I said disappointedly.

“Did you see his shadow?” Fuzz asked. “Didn’t it look like that waiter guy?”

“It did! This is getting really weird.”

“I wonder what’s happening in the Rumble. Let’s see whose shadow the waiter got!” Fuzz suggested. Not having a better idea, I agreed, and we headed to the café.

In the streets, we saw people in panic. Someone tried to hit at the shadow dogs biting her legs with a broom; another ran away from the shadow of the town’s dreaded bailiff. An old market trader bickered with her neighbour’s shadow and the cloth merchant we stole from had received the shadows of three young women, who tried and failed to run away.

As we got closer to the centre of town, more and more people drew into the shade, away from the purple sunshine. When we reached the Rumble, the waiter was sweeping on the terrace. We could see even from a distance that his shadow was much too large for him – it seemed he had swapped with Bruin!

“Now I know what happened!” said Fuzz. “We must have all swapped with whoever we were thinking of when you turned the globe. I was definitely thinking about that awful vul’rah. And you?”

“The pale merchant in the hat.” I nodded.

“Bruin and the waiter were thinking of each other, and Scylla …”

“Thinking of herself, as always.”

“But what shall we do now? Things can’t stay like this!”

Suddenly, we saw Fuzz’s new shadow in front of us. The vul’rah dove at us with scary speed. We broke into a run. Its ear-splitting screech became louder but before we could reach the corner the horrible bird had taken Fuzz. It flew up high, and the zei’zei couldn’t escape no matter how hard he kicked. On the ground, their mismatched shadows fought desperately, and though I cried for help, nobody came.

“So here you are, you little thief!” I heard the sharp voice of the pale merchant. He approached me slowly, like a predator. The ox followed him with the wagon and it looked as if its huge horns had grown out of the pale man’s head. I tried to run back into the Rumble but didn’t even make it to the terrace. His shadow drew me back and I fell down into the dust. I kept trying to creep toward the café but the shadow pulled me back again and again. Soon there were only a few steps between us.

“Do you have any idea what you’ve done?” the merchant asked. For a moment I glimpsed his corpse-like face under his hat. His deep-set eyes seemed to drain the last of my strength, then at his feet I saw my shadow struggling as helplessly as I was.

“You used the crystal in full daylight? You utter fool! Give it back and I’ll stop this nightmare!”

I reached into my pocket and grabbed the crystal.

“Set Fuzz free first!”

The pale man looked up at the sky and motioned to the vul’rah. “You don’t even know what you have in your pocket, you little thief! Give it back to me instead of turning the whole world upside down!”

The vul’rah landed and let go of Fuzz’s lifeless body. The pale man held out his hand expectantly. I pulled the crystal ball out of my pocket but before he could take it, a coffee cup flew past his head. I turned back and saw the waiter among the tables on the terrace. Behind him stood the kitchen staff with plates in their hands and the café owner pointing a crossbow at the pale man. I cheered inwardly at my cavalry. The owner shot his arrow, which just missed the pale man’s ear by an inch. Outnumbered, he finally gave up.

“All right, then! Let’s see how long you can manage without your shadow,” he said with venom, before hurrying over to his wagon.

He climbed on with the vul’rah by his side and the ox pulled the wagon into a side street.

I slid the crystal ball back into my pocket, then rushed over to Fuzz. He was still breathing! The waiter came to help and we took him into the café. I poured cold water over him and I had never been so happy to be spat over.

“My head! What’s happened?” he asked.

“You defeated the vul’rah, that’s what’s happened!”

“Did I? We were fighting so hard that it hid above the clouds but I wrestled it down to the ground, then … hey, what happened then?”

“We chased it and the pale man away together!” I said and cast a grateful glance at the waiter.

While Fuzz recovered, the waiter went out to the terrace to stand guard and warn us in case the merchant came back.

I grabbed the crystal and let the cold creep into my fingers. I closed my eyes and tried to understand why anybody would want to steal a shadow but all I could feel was the crystal. Finally, I took out Mum’s tarot deck, which always helped me when I didn’t know what to do.

My mother had often read the cards to me. They had never let me down. Somehow, I always picked the card I needed. I took one from the deck and it showed a young sailor walking toward the sea with a fishing rod, followed by a little zei’zei just like Fuzz. *Let’s see where he’s going*, I thought, and I drew the next card. It showed the Sun smiling down at a young man, with the shadow of a woman at his feet. My mother had always turned this card around, so I did the same. It went dark, day was followed by night. The moon shone at the top and the shadow had turned into a woman with radiant hair, whose shadow was that of a man. *Your shadow hides things that make you whole,* I remembered Mum’s words. For the third card, I pulled The Strength, which showed a young pirate pulling out his sword against a sea monster attacking the crew.

“Strength,” I murmured.

“So, what is the pirate tarot saying?” Fuzz asked.

“We must return the shadows to the right people.”

“I know that, but how?”

As soon as he’d asked the question, I suddenly felt incredibly weak – as if something had been torn out of me. I grasped the arm of the chair.

“What is it?” Fuzz asked.

I stared at the merchant’s growing shadow on the floor, then all I could see was blackness as if I was being squeezed into a small space and the air was running out around me. I felt the zei’zei’s hand on my shoulder. He shook me and I breathed in deeply. I found myself once again at the table in the Rumble.

“The bottles!” I shouted.

“What bottles?”

“In the pale man’s wagon – the ones with that black treacle stuff inside! I’ve ended up there, too!”

“What are you talking about? You’re here with us!”

“Yes, but I’m also there! It feels like part of me is trapped in one of the bottles! I can even sense the vul’rah in the wagon. There are others too, swirling about in their bottles like animals in a cage.”

“We have to do something!” Fuzz said, heading off to the terrace.

I felt I had regained enough strength and was ready to challenge the merchant. When I had seen my shadow at the pale man’s feet, I hadn’t felt connected to it. Now that it was in his bottle, I felt as if a piece of me was missing. The invisible connection between me and my shadow had somehow been severed. As we left the Rumble, I wondered what it was like to live without a shadow. But I knew I didn’t want it to be trapped in the suffocating void of the bottle.

Fuzz tracked the ox by following its scent, but I knew already which way to go. My imprisoned shadow pulled me toward the sand dunes outside the town gates. The sun was setting and the merchant's shadow was right behind me. This time it didn't try to pull me back and, from the top of one of the dunes we soon caught sight of the wagon. The tarpaulin was lifted on one side, revealing the bookshelf with the bottles. But we saw no movement.

"Do you think it's a trap?" Fuzz asked.

"I bet it is. But if we can get to the bottles, I might be able to set the shadows free," I said.

We were just a stone's throw away when the vul'rah appeared. Then the pale merchant came out from behind the wagon, walked a few steps and stood face to face with us.

"Are you missing anything, little thief?"

"Aren't you missing your own shadow?" I retorted, but he just smiled back.

"It's not my first time without it." He pointed at the bottles. "Sometimes I lend my shadow to someone in return for theirs, so they'll set out to find it and walk into my trap. Just like you've done."

"I knew you'd be waiting for me."

"Is that so? Do you even know what happens to those who see my shadow instead of their own? My shadow follows their every move and they slowly become more and more terrified!" He paused for a moment, but seeing he hadn't scared me, he went on. "You're lucky. You know how the crystal works. But how do you think those who have no idea react? Do they scream for help? Do they run out into the night? It really doesn't matter because they can't escape me. My shadow grows longer in the purple moonlight, and it follows them until they go mad. Sooner or later, they get caught by the light of the moon or a lamp. Once, there was someone so desperate to escape me that she extinguished all her oil lamps in the sand.

But one of them rolled among the animals, then the straw caught fire and the tent and most of the circus burned down.” His hypnotic gaze held me captive. “Yes, little thief! You can’t deny it because your shadow and hers are so similar!”

“Mum!” I whispered.

“I’d already captured her shadow in a bottle when she ran away from the flames and found me. All that was left to do was retrieve my shadow. Of course, to get it, I had to tear it away from her, and nobody has ever survived that. But I’m sure that’s not news to you. You can’t live long without a shadow.”

Turbulent thoughts rocked me as I stared at the bottles. The shadows inside stopped swirling, all except one. I knew it was her instantly.

“And now, I want my crystal back!” The pale man moved toward me.

The vul’rah swooped at Fuzz, pushing him away from my side. I reached into my pocket and grabbed the crystal so I could throw it at the merchant’s face when he got close enough. Then the bottles started rattling on the shelf. The shadows in them swirled with great force – as if they were preparing to break out. I pulled the crystal out and threw it at the wagon. It passed the pale man’s shoulder and hit the bookshelf, crashing into the bottles and shattering them.

When the merchant looked back, the shadows had appeared on the sand in their original forms and started floating toward him. He tried to escape but they closed around him and swirled so fast that I couldn’t even recognize mine. Then one shadow hit him like a whip and he fell onto the sand.

“You fool! Stop them immediately!” He turned paler than ever.

“You wish!” I answered. I wanted to watch the shadows consume him, but for some reason they held back.

“Please! I have no power over them without the crystal!” he finally admitted as he tried to keep away from them.

I went to the wagon, jumped up among the splinters and found the crystal ball. There wasn't a single scratch on it, and it still emitted the same purple light.

"Bring me that damn crystal!" he shouted, and several shadows rushed toward him.

"They seem quite angry," I stated, then jumped off the wagon. I didn't care what they would do to him. All I wanted to know was how to end the spell. "Tell me what to do!"

"Give it to me and you'll get your shadow back!" I knew better than to believe him. "You won't succeed without me," he said. But the shadows gathered speed, now almost touching his feet.

"All right!" He relented. "Face east and turn the crystal to the left."

I did as instructed.

"Now face west and turn it to the right!"

With a click, the crystal went dark and became a transparent sphere once more. The sand dunes, the sky, even the sun regained their normal colours. Fuzz skipped happily toward me from one of the dunes and pointed at his shadow, cheering. I looked down and realized I had my own shadow back too. But the pale merchant was still surrounded. He couldn't move without touching the shadows and he didn't seem ready to risk that. Even his own shadow huddled close to him, trembling on the sand.

One floated onto the merchant's hand and suddenly his arm shrank to skin and bone. So that was why he kept stealing shadows – through them he had drained his victims of their lifeforce!

The other shadows moved toward him to take back their strength and left the pale man a skeletal figure, hardly visible under his clothes.

"Please, call them back!" he begged. "If you let me go, I will never return to this wretched town!"

They all moved away, allowing the pale man to reach his ox. He pulled himself up with difficulty and stumbled over to the cart. As he climbed

slowly onto the wagon, the vul’rah swooped down by his side and they set off into the wasteland.

“I don’t want to see you in my town ever again!” Fuzz shouted after them, shaking his fist.

The shadows dispersed among the sand dunes. But one stayed, floating closer to mine. Her long, curly locks fluttered on the sand like they always had, and she reached out to me with her darkened hands.

“Mum?” I dropped the crystal ball and burst into tears.

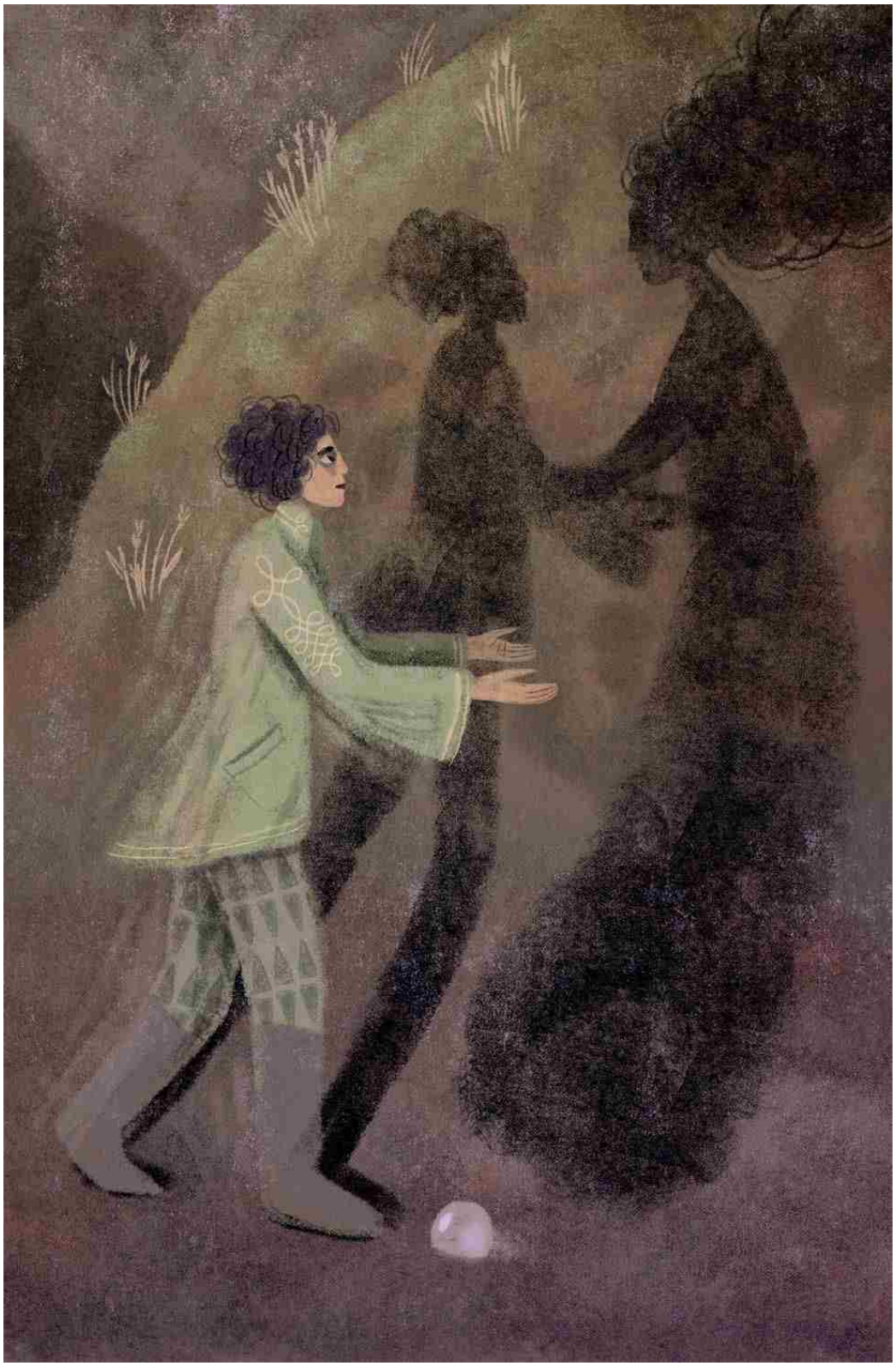
She hugged my shadow, consoling me as only she could. I didn’t dare move, lest she disappear and I wished she would never leave. Then she kissed my forehead and melted into my own shadow.

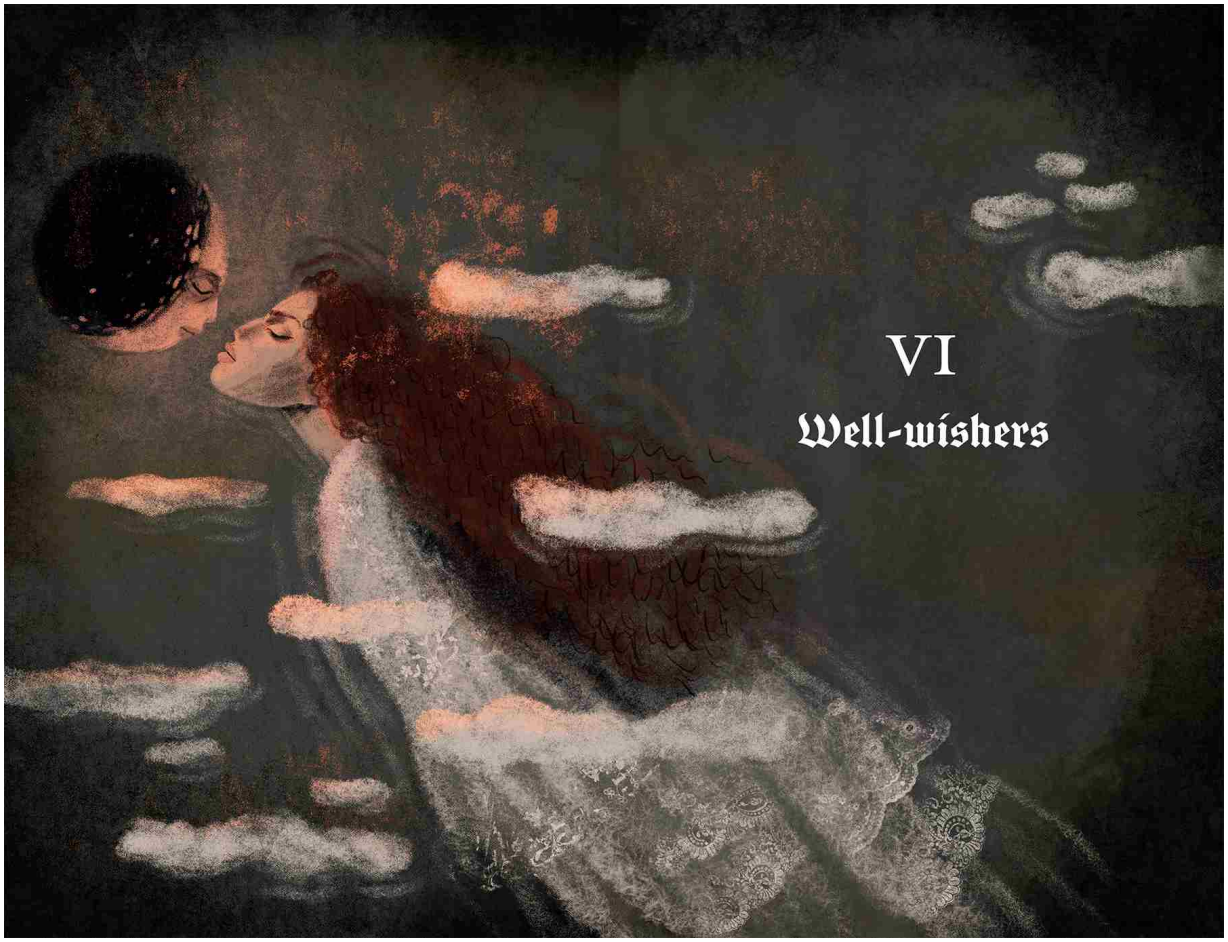
That was the last time I saw her. But now I know the meaning of The Sun – the most beautiful tarot card – and that my shadow is so much more than it seems. She’s in there too and I’ll never lose her again.

Fuzz slid the crystal ball into my pocket, took my hand and we started walking back.

The town was buzzing when we arrived. Some were hugging each other with happiness because they’d got their shadows back. Others were marching toward the town hall, demanding compensation. The vendors were unpacking their merchandise under the arches just as they always had. And at the Rumble, we saw Bruin, who was finally getting to know the waiter. They were so absorbed in conversation that it seemed someone else would have to serve the guests that day.

Fuzz let go of my hand and stood in front of me with a serious face. “So, are we going to buy that elephant or what?”





VI

Well-wishers

I STILL HAVE the Crystal of Shadows but, don't worry, I don't use it. The only time I tried was to save Fuzz, when he was a very old zei'zei and fell ill. But he convinced me not to – by that time, we both knew that we would never really lose each other.

And what happened to the pale man in the hat? One day I might tell you his story but it's now time to move on from avengers and mesmerizers and meet those who use their powers to help others. You can recognize well-wishers because instead of blood and suffering, they leave a legacy of healing. They still know the oldest magic, which can only be used with the purest of intentions. Let's explore their positive powers! It might sound naïve, yet it's true – those who think only of themselves will never be satisfied. However, those who share their last morsel will not stay hungry because they step into a reality where there are no boundaries. After all, when you give to others, you are really giving to yourself because there is no difference between *one self* and *the other.*

But if we are truly one, why do we have such diverse personalities? Is that a curse or a blessing? Maybe both. Either way, it enables us to smile back at *ourselves* with a thousand unique smiles. Nowadays there are very few witches who know this secret, but as long as there is just one for every hundred tricksters, the world is not lost. This is the power we all have if we do not act for glory or fame or out of revenge. Such wise witches are shining moons in the night. Though they are rare, I have still managed to collect a few for the next chapter.

Marie Laveau, the Voodoo Queen of New Orleans

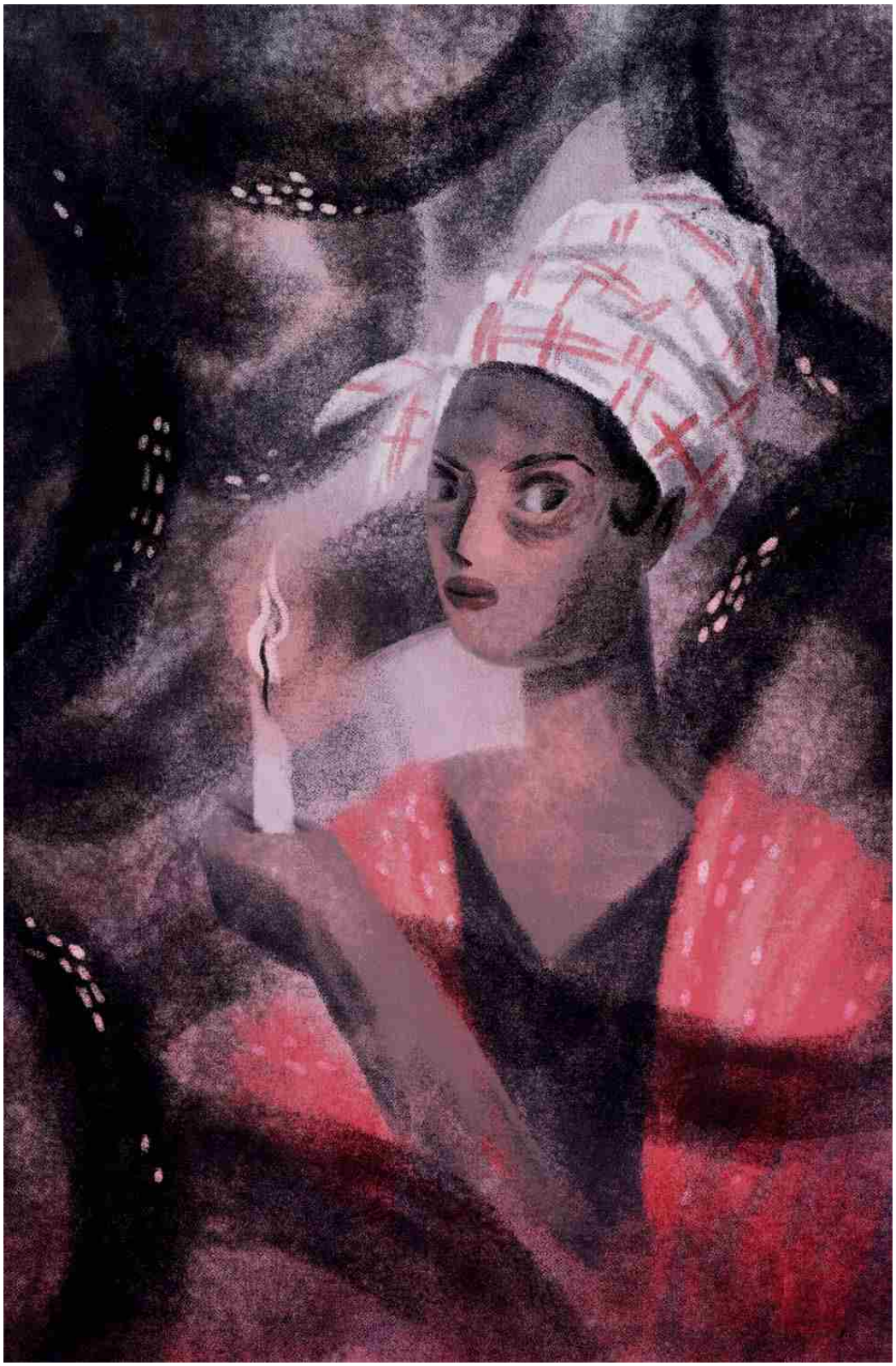
TYPE spiritual leader

AREA New Orleans, United States

LIVED 10 September 1801–15 June 1881

TALE Though her great-grandmother was taken to Louisiana from Africa as a slave, Laveau was born a free woman in New Orleans. She first worked as a hairdresser, but she was also an expert in herbal medicine and soon became the spiritual leader of Louisiana Voodoo. Many people sought out the Voodoo Queen for advice about marital problems and conflict resolution. They even asked her opinion on financial affairs and childbearing. Besides advice, Laveau also gave them a *gris-gris* or charm that protected them from evil and brought them good luck. As an activist, she paid the bail fees for women of colour and cared for the sick during the yellow fever epidemic.

On Sundays she and the Voodoo King, who played a role secondary to his queen, held ceremonies where they sang, danced and summoned spirits. The biggest festival was held on Midsummer Night and even the curious white inhabitants of New Orleans took part. Some say Marie Laveau could summon Damballah, the great voodoo *lwa* or spirit in serpent form known as “Li Grand Zombi” in Louisiana.



Machi

TYPE shaman

AREA Chile and Argentina (Mapuche people)

POWERS restoring lost balance

TALE In the thatched *ruka* or communal house, people are gathering around the fire to be healed from their illness. The machi or shaman will soon find out why the cosmic order has been disturbed within them and what they must do to help them. Will it be singing to the rhythm of the kultrun drum? Interpreting their dreams? Or conjuring or exorcising spirits with herbs?

Machis claim that Ngünechen, the giver of life has four identities: Old Woman, Old Man, Young Woman and Young Man. During the healing ceremony, shamans can float freely between these and restore the lost balance that is the cause of physical and mental illness. Some male *machis* wear women's scarves, causing some people to believe they are witches *(bruja)* or sexual deviants. Female shamans are considered outsiders because of their "male power" and male shamans because of their "female power"– until their help is needed. And they fulfill the request as they are healers and possess wisdom that the Western world has only started to rediscover.

Morgan le Fay

TYPE fairy, enchantress, sorcerer

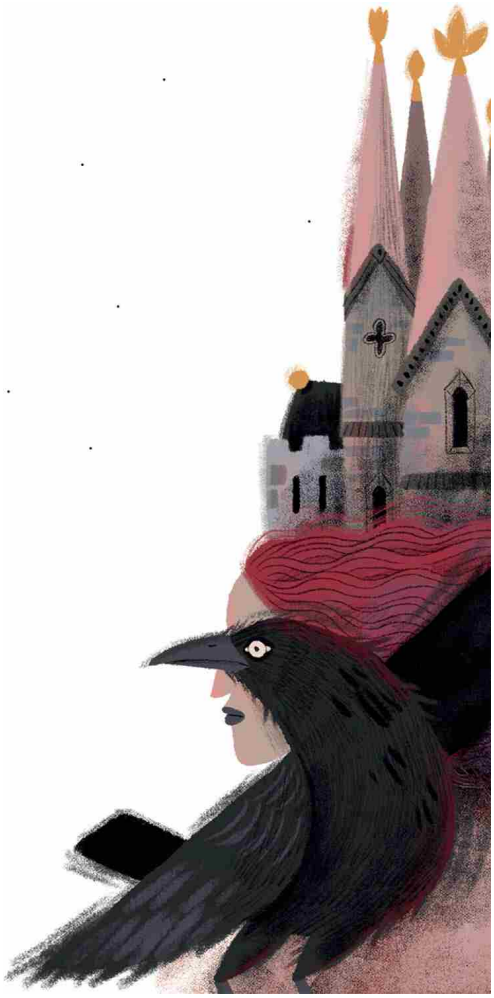
AREA

Great Britain

POWERS healing, sorcery

TALE It is no secret that history is written by the victors, and legends are often shaped by them as well. When we hear the name Morgan le Fay, we immediately think of a power-hungry witch who unscrupulously exploited others and preyed on the righteous. Although the details of Arthurian legend vary, in the earliest stories Morgan's character is the exact opposite of her modern portrayal. She lives on the mysterious island of Avalon, skilled not only in herbal medicine but also in astronomy, flying, mathematics and shape-shifting. She and her eight fairy sisters – Moronoe, Mazoe, Gliten, Glitonea, Gliton, Tyronoe, Thiten and Thiton – used their magic for good. After Arthur is mortally wounded, he is taken to Morgan, who saves his life and becomes his protector.

But in the centuries that followed, as magic became increasingly conflated with dark and evil forces by Christianity, Morgan's character turned more malevolent until she became the evil sorcerer she is widely known as today.



Đirona/Sirona/Thirona

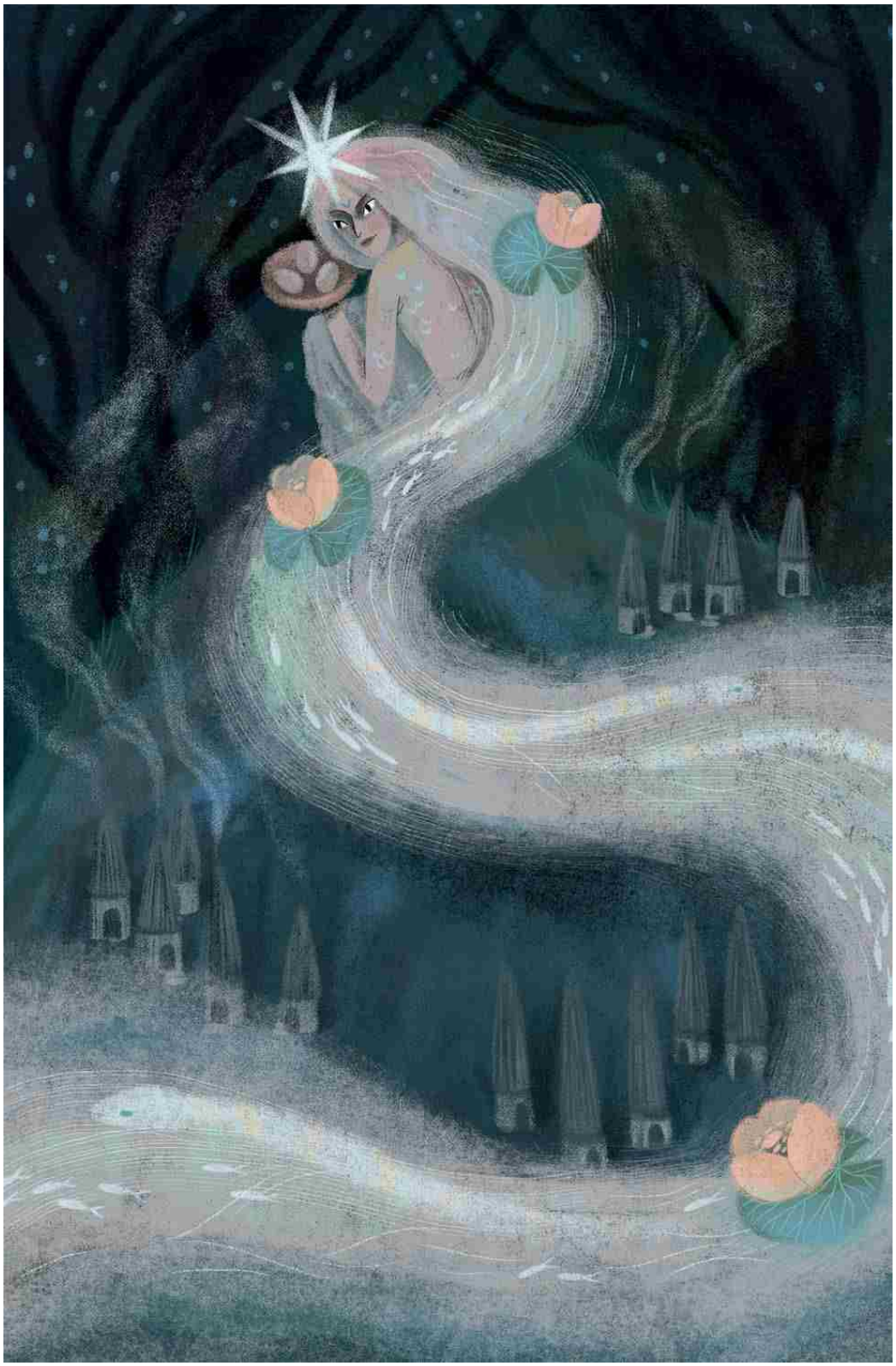
TYPE goddess

AREA Western and Central Europe

POWERS healing

TALE Water is the source of life and from it material existence emerged. This element makes up a large part of our bodies and our ancestors recognized the miraculous power of medicinal waters. The European Celts revered Đirona as the goddess of healing springs. One of her symbols is the

coiled, writhing serpent on her arm, which signals renewal by shedding its skin. In her other hand she holds three eggs in a patera or shallow bowl, which are also a symbol of rebirth and fertility. She is sometimes depicted with a cornucopia, which promises not only recovery but also prosperity. Even though she is the goddess of springs, her name, Đirona, is not related to water, but to the sky, as it means a great star or celestial body. She is the shining star in the dark despair of the night, offering hope that the life-giving sun will rise again to those who suffer.



Itako

TYPE shaman

AREA Japan

POWERS communication with the dead

TALE People in Japan think there is a special relationship between blindness and spiritual abilities. Only blind girls can become *itako* or shamans who speak the language of the dead. These girls are raised as ascetics. During their initiation ceremony they fast for days and might even lose consciousness and become possessed by a spirit. Their initiation culminates in a ceremony reminiscent of a wedding.

Today there are fewer than 20 *itako* in Japan. They each have a bamboo box where they keep objects used for rituals, such as protective charms and a necklace made of bones, bears' teeth, eagles' claws and seashells. They can communicate with *kami* or Shinto spirits and also with the dead during the Kuchiyose ritual, a Japanese tradition more than 1,000 years old.

Göncöl

TYPE *táltos* (a person with superhuman abilities)

AREA Csallóköz, Carpathian Basin (Hungarian people)

POWERS telling the future

TALE *Göncöl*, the kind-hearted *táltos*, has his own constellation, which is known today as the Great Bear. In his celestial

form, he helps people. When his stars appear tiny, the weather is going to be good; when they grow bigger, winds and storms are coming. Legend says that long ago he performed many miracles and understood not only the language of the animals but even the whisper of the trees, the splashing of the creek and the whistling of the wind. He could foretell danger from burned bones and ashes and warn those he deemed worthy. He could rise into the sky with his cart and always helped those in need. The Old God rewarded him for this by taking him up to the Milky Way, which the people of Csallóköz call “The Way of Fairies”.

Paula de Eguiluz

TYPE witch

AREA Caribbean coastal region (now Panama and Colombia)

TRIALS 1624–1636

TALE Paula de Eguiluz was a slave of African origin. She lived in the Caribbean harbour town of Cartagena where she performed healing and love magic. The Spanish Inquisition took her to the Tribunal of the Holy Office three times. They wanted her to confess that she had made a pact with the Devil and participated in witches’ sabbaths. The first time she was sentenced to 200 lashes and was forced to work in a hospital wearing a *sambenito*, a penitential garment. Eight years later she was again convicted, this time for practising forbidden love magic. She was accused of teaching enslaved women like herself

magic spells that could make a man fall in love with them or rid them of a man whose attentions they did not want.

According to legend, Paula was such a famous healer in Cartagena that even the town's bishop asked for her help. But when the Inquisition discovered that it was a slave rather than a Spanish doctor who had cured the Church leader, Paula was sentenced to death at the stake.

Heka

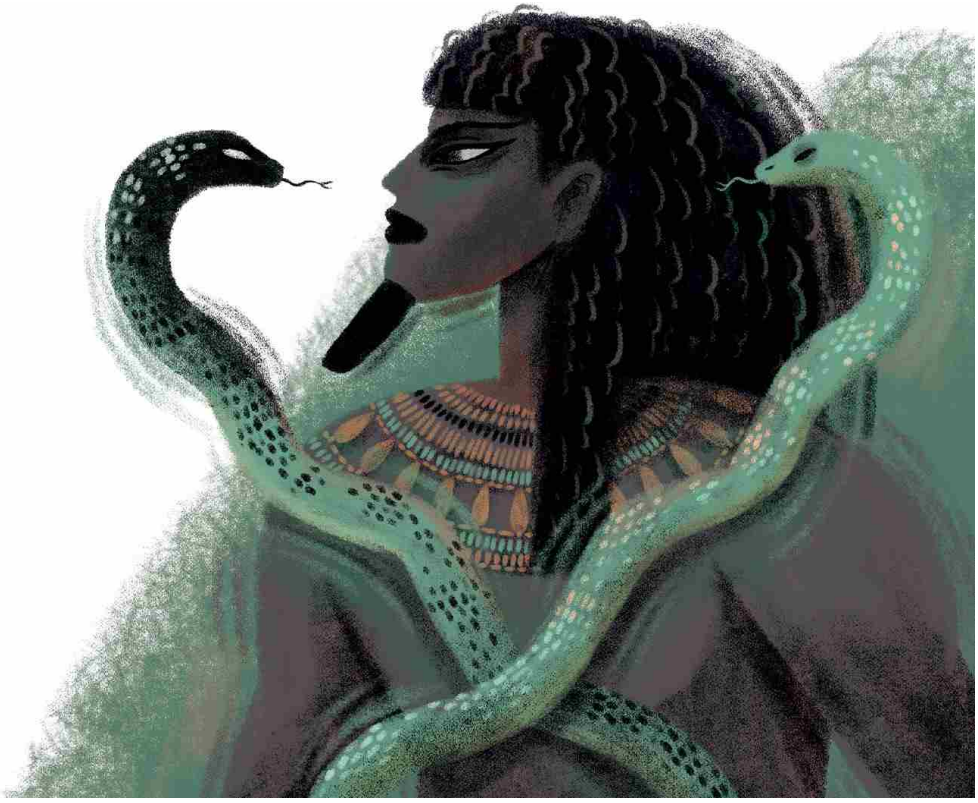
TYPE god

AREA ancient Egypt

POWERS creative force

TALE Magic has not always been as sharply divided from religion and science as it is today. Perhaps it is easier to understand if we put our modern social and cultural conceptions to one side. According to ancient Egyptian tradition, magic had existed before the world knew of dualities and it was therefore not judged as being either "good" or "bad."

Heka is the Egyptian god of magic and medicine. He is also the creative force behind words, images and deeds. All the living creatures in the universe owe their vitality to him. His symbols include two intertwined snakes, and his name incorporates the word *ka*, the concept of vital force.



Benandanti

TYPE spirit walker

AREA North-Eastern Italy

POWERS leaving the body, fighting malevolent witches *in spirito*

TALE Historically, *benandanti* or “good walkers” were witches in the eyes of the Church, but the inhabitants of Friuli province regarded them as healers who protected the harvest. We know from Inquisition investigations that four times a year, during the nights of ember days – quarterly periods of prayer and fasting in the western Christian calendar – they entered a cataleptic state and left their bodies in the form of spirits. They rode cats, mice or hares to otherworldly fields, where they fought the *malandanti*,

the evil witches. The *malandanti* fought with sticks of sorghum, which they also used as brooms, while the *benandanti* used bundles of fennel. If the *benandanti* won, they protected the harvest; if they lost, the *malandanti* ruined the wheat and the wine.

According to local lore, if a baby was born in a caul, it was a sure sign that they would be able to leave their body in a spirit form. During their initiation in their sleep, the sound of drums called them after the other *benandanti*, though many were reluctant to go because of the dangers. A *benandanti's* seemingly lifeless body was not allowed to be turned over during their otherworldly trip, otherwise they could not return and were doomed to wander as a stray soul until the end of time. Despite all the good deeds the *benandanti* carried out, the Inquisition did not differentiate between good and evil witches. Many of them were persecuted for heresy. However, the *benandanti* were sworn to secrecy and they never revealed who their companions, or even their enemies the *malandanti*, were.

WELL-WISHERS KNOW SOMETHING that is difficult to fathom amid the hustle and bustle of everyday life, especially when we are so absorbed in our individuality. This secret is simply that there is no such thing as a personal spiritual path.

In alchemy, we can only rise from the deepest point of *nigredo* with the help of others or *for the sake of others*. If we seem to have gone further all alone and only for ourselves, we might still be in the dark pit of *putrefaction*. However, if we realize that the path glowing in our soul leads not into some secret paradise but directly to others, we can finally enter *albedo* and start the next phase in spiritual alchemy called *whitening*.

The first step of *albedo* is *cibation* or nurturing, which replenishes both body and soul after the trials of *nigredo*. After this comes *sublimation*, the elevation of the spirit among those who can already see through the veil of matter.

In the Major Arcana, our next card is The Lover, which symbolizes the relationship between souls. Overwhelming love can be just as bewildering as being mesmerized by a trickster and yet could not be further from their negativity. Such bewilderment is caused by the evaporation of another veil – the illusion of the material world – after which it becomes clear that there are in fact no boundaries between spheres and between souls. Few knew more about this than Ayodé, a healer in a small harbour town who, because of a fatal mistake, was forced to make the ultimate sacrifice to save her beloved.

Ayodé

AYODÉ STRETCHED OUT in bed and looked cheerfully at the nimble spots of light chasing each other as they jumped over the sheets and rested on Leandro's stubbly face. *How sound he is sleeping!* she thought. She wondered whether he would be woken by the lights so she could hold him before leaving. But her man did not move, so Ayodé leaned back to lie next to him, recalling their fingers intertwining, the stars glowing in the sky and his kiss.

The rising sun now brought Ayodé's thoughts back to the tiny room overlooking the harbour. She tenderly removed some locks of Leandro's hair from his shoulder to see the wound left by the pirate's sword. It was healing nicely. *Soon there will only be a scar*, she thought. She got up to collect some herbs from her bag to brew an infusion to ease his pain.

After the pirate attack, many injured men arrived in the harbour. Blood had been pouring from Leandro's arm and, as the best healer in town, she was called to tend him. Despite the blood loss, all he'd cared about were his books. The King of Spain had sent him to research the customs of the unknown people in the New World, but after the attack, he had been forced to stay in town. Time had passed and he could have gone on his way, but he could not leave Ayodé.

As an envoy of the King, Leandro was hosted by the town's bishop, a fleshy-faced, mean little man. He decorated the episcopal palace with treasure robbed from locals. His men raided graves for gold jewellery and

he had anything depicting deities melted down and made into forks and plates for his elaborate meals.

Leandro despised his host. Ayodé smiled as she remembered how outraged he had been when he heard of the stolen treasures. *How beautiful he was then*, she thought. Just like now, lying on the bed. She made his infusion then blew a soft kiss onto his face. She did not want to wake him and she had to leave before the day patrol got to the palace. They could not find out she had spent the night here!

She shut the door quietly as she left and crept down the stairs. The servants did not notice her take a piece of leftover bread and sneak out from the building. She crossed the sunlit square and walked over to the parrot-green house where an old fisherman was begging. She bent down and greeted him cheerfully.

"Good morning, *abuelo*! Did you sleep well? Lovely day, isn't it?"

"It is now you're here!" The old man smiled.

"Did you drink yesterday's potion as I told you?"

"Of course I did! Look how well it's healing!" The fisherman tried to stretch his aching leg but Ayodé stopped him gently.

"Just rest and it will heal soon," she promised, taking a small vial from her purse. "The next dose of coconut oil, bay leaves – and our favourite … snake's eggs!"

The old man pulled a face.

"Don't be like that!" she chided. "Look, I have even brought you breakfast, right from the bishop's kitchen!"

"From the bishop? How?"

"That's my secret …" She winked, and left for the harbour.

Down by the shore she stopped at the docks and counted the ships in the port. As a child she had admired the sails when the wind caught them and

sent the ships speeding out to sea. She was ten years old when her mother told her the first true story that was not a fairy tale – a chilling account that had swept away her admiration for ships. She recalled her mother's words.

"There must have been one hundred of us locked in the ship's hold. We hardly got any water, food or air, and every day those who did not behave were whipped. Many didn't survive. I had to be careful not to get beaten since you were with me. You were born not long after the slave traders anchored in the harbour. When they went ashore for water, Neshí's father and other people in the forest attacked them and chased them into the sea! Only a few of us were left and they took us in. We have been living with them in the woods ever since. They healed those who were sick and taught us the secrets of medicinal plants. We are forever grateful to Neshí and her people but will never forget where we came from!"

Ayodé counted seven ships. She wondered where they had come from and where they were headed. She turned back toward the colourful houses where young fishermen were hurrying along the shore toward their boats. Waving to them enthusiastically, she heard the thud of boots stomping down the street – *the patrol*!

Ayodé drew back into a side street. She walked noiselessly by the wall to avoid the soldiers – she had done it many times to get to Delia's place safely. She hurriedly crossed the town until she saw the sign with an eight-armed beast that meant safety: The Tipsy Kraken.

Pushing open the door of the inn, she inhaled the familiar rum-scented air. Valross sat behind the bar with his arms folded, his red beard covering his huge belly. There were not many guests this morning, only some sailors and freeloaders, some of them staying in Delia's rooms upstairs.

Valross watched disapprovingly as the sleep-deprived guests ordered breakfast instead of beer. His face lit up the moment he saw Ayodé. Then he folded his arms even tighter under his beard and tried to look stern.

“And where have you been? Looking after one of your beggars, I expect. You know you’ll never make a living out of them!”

“I know.” Ayodé smiled.

Valross grumbled something into his beard and returned to cleaning the dishes and glasses. Ayodé was always amazed at how gently those strong hands handled the delicate glass.

Delia’s majestic figure appeared on the gallery and the queen of the Tipsy Kraken motioned her to come upstairs.

“You were with him, weren’t you?” Delia asked as Ayodé walked up the steps. “When I saw you together yesterday, I knew you wouldn’t come home last night. He’s a nice young man. But you know it’s not him I’m worried about …” Delia looked knowingly at Ayodé.

The girl cast her eyes down, leaned over the bannister. In the bar below, Valross took down a bottle from the shelf and poured some rum for a sailor sat at the counter, who was telling him angrily that the bishop had raided a grave again. Ayodé shivered – such raids never came without consequences.

The door of the inn creaked closed behind a hooded figure. The stranger stepped up to the counter and turned to the sailor. “There’s no need to worry, he won’t be raiding graves much longer.”

Hearing the familiar voice, Ayodé squealed with joy. Running down the stairs, she flung her arms around the figure – Neshí had arrived.

“What are you doing in town? How did you get past the guards?” Ayodé asked her old friend as they sat down at a table.

“I could ask you the same thing. You left the woods to come here three years ago and never returned!” She looked around the tavern. “Are you still a healer?”

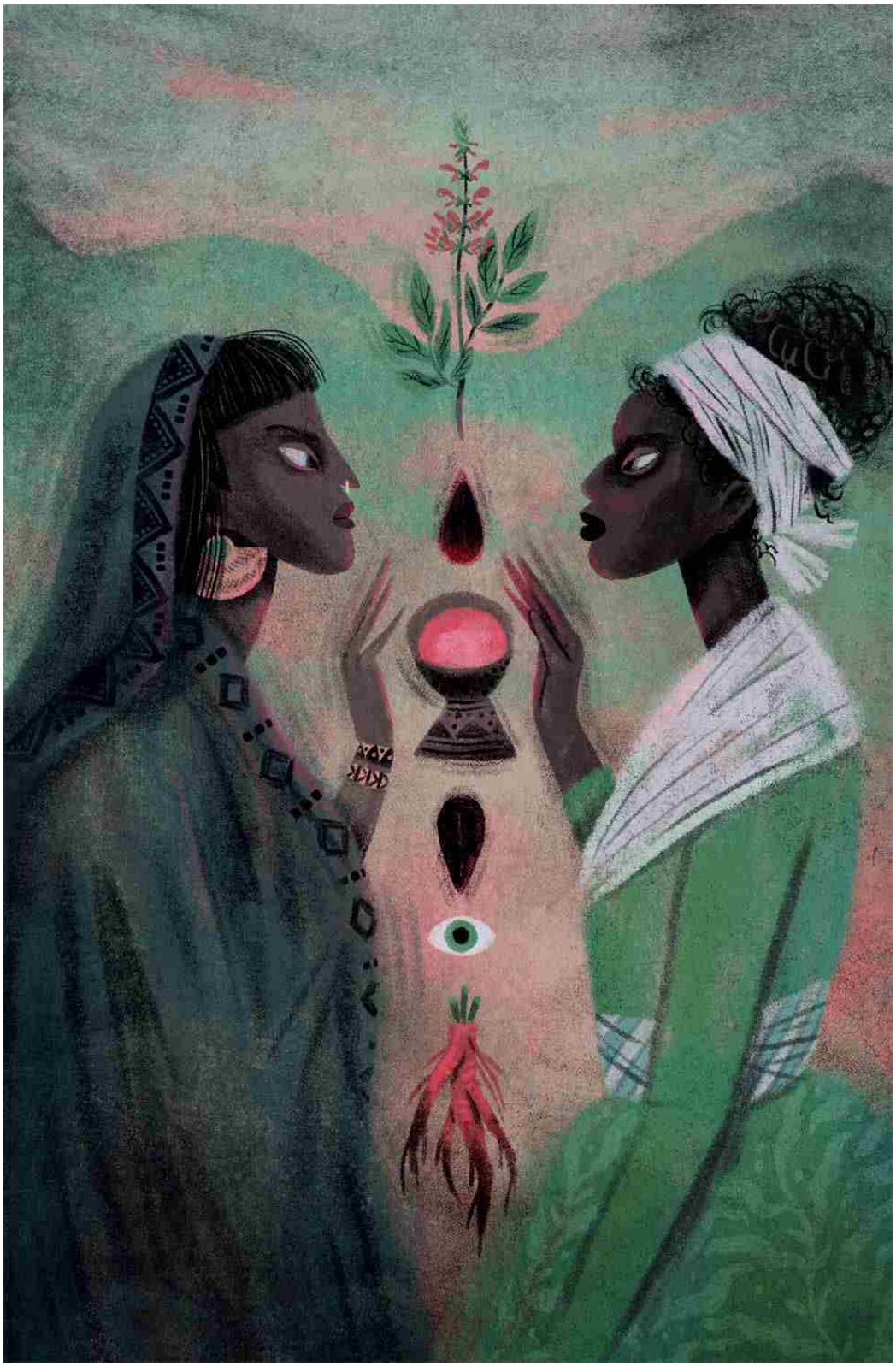
“Of course!” Ayodé said proudly and began to list the potions she was preparing for her patients.

Neshí nodded but her thoughts were clearly elsewhere.

“Is everything all right?” Ayodé asked.

“Yes. Everything is finally all right,” Neshí answered. “After you left we learned how to make poisons. I know you were never taught any magic more complicated than healing potions. You simply add a bit more red sage instead of laurel leaf, then an extra secret ingredient. One that I cannot reveal. But it turns the healing potion into something different. It’s our only weapon against them.” Neshí leaned in closer. “The soldiers and the bishop desecrated one of our last graves yesterday! Those bones had been resting in peace for thousands and thousands of moons and in a single night thirty of us were killed when we tried to protect the grave. This will not end until they have torn the last gold necklace from our necks. Whether in a battle or from a grave, it doesn’t matter to them!”

Neshí’s lips were trembling with anger. “We made a decision. They disturbed the peace of our ancestors, so we cursed them. Their souls will never find peace but will continue to roam this world, among the stolen treasures, until the end of time. It was easy to get into the bishop’s quarters, those servants were only watching the kitchen and nothing else. He must have been down at breakfast, so I sprinkled the black powder into his daily potion – you know the one he takes for his stomach problems. It dissolved quickly without trace. I was only surprised that the bishop’s bedroom was not as fancy or luxurious as I’d expected it to be …”



The blood ran from Ayodé's face and she jerked her hand away from Neshí's. Her mouth opened in a scream that shook the whole building. She heard the back of the chair hit the floor and Valross and Delia shout after her. She heard the door crash open as she ran out into the street, but she barely registered any of it.

She ran past the colourful houses, past the old fisherman and across the square to the bishop's palace. She flew up the stairs to Leandro's room and flung the door open. But the wind was no longer blowing the curtains and the rays of the sun were no longer dancing on Leandro's face. She cried and cried, bending over his unconscious body on the bed.

"Ayodé!"

Who had spoken? Covering her face with her hands, she sobbed. Then she heard the voice again. She looked up and cried out in horror. Above the bed, a shining figure hovered. It looked like Leandro had that morning but there was no stubble on his face, no curls in his hair. But Leandro was still lying there on the bed. Terrified, she looked at the sparkling figure hovering above his body, which was somehow also him.

"What happened?" the figure said. "Everything's so strange! I woke up but I can't move!"

"Leandro?" Her voice was choked with tears.

"Yes, it's me."

"How … Wait. Did you drink the infusion I prepared for you this morning?" she asked.

"Y-yes, I did. After I'd eaten my breakfast, but then I felt so tired so I went back to bed."

"The curse," she whispered almost inaudibly.

"Curse?" Leandro asked. His shape started vibrating and he became transparent. Something moved behind him and the lights dispersed in front of Ayodé's eyes.

A maid entered the room to make the bed but, startled by what she saw, ran out of the room screaming. The shining figure vanished, leaving only Leandro's unconscious body on the bed.

Several people dressed in red appeared at the door, saying something to Ayodé. All she understood were the words "cup", "poison" and "Leandro". Guards came forward, grabbed hold of her arms and dragged her away.

Ayodé found herself locked in a cold dark cell in the basement. Who knows how much time passed before she heard footsteps approaching. It was a servant-boy whose mother she had recently treated for a spider bite. She sighed with relief.

The boy hung his torch on the wall and bent down to Ayodé. "I heard what happened. The whole house is upset – the bishop says you tried to kill Leandro! Was it really you?" he asked.

"Of course not! My friend Neshí …"

The boy poked his hand through the bars and patted her arm. "I didn't believe you could do that. I'll leave this torch here for you, but I must go now before they notice I've come down to see you."

Ayodé looked at him gratefully. "Listen, could you bring me a book from Leandro's room?" she asked.

"There is a guard outside the door and he'll need a break at some point so I might get a chance to sneak in. Which book do you want?"

"Sahagún's thirteenth volume, the end book on Leandro's shelf. It's the only one with magic symbols on the spine."

The boy nodded and left, leaving Ayodé alone once more. She sat down on the cold stone floor, now lit by the torch. Neshí's words echoed in her mind. "You just add a bit more red sage instead of laurel leaf … and an extra secret ingredient." Ayodé had never learned any harmful magic but

she was sure she would discover something in Leandro's book that could help her break the curse.

Long hours passed before the boy returned. He passed the book to her through the bars and Ayodé thanked him for his courage.

"I hope they'll set you free soon – they must know you wouldn't harm anyone!" the boy answered and left.

Ayodé sat back against the wall and started reading the chapter titles: Love Charms, Healing Herbs … Curses and Poisons. She was immersed in the spells when she came across an illustration of a figure made up of beams of light, just like Leandro had appeared earlier. She read the curse feverishly. "Leaves of red sage, the tip of a feathered snake's beak …" The next words filled her with horror. "… and black earth from the bottom of a grave, ground into a fine powder and mixed into a drink. This will make the victim fall into a deep sleep and wander the world separated from their body until someone breaks the curse."

Ayodé searched in vain for the rest of the instructions. As she was wondering what to do, the shadow of the cell's bars moved. Then Leandro's bright figure floated through the bars.

"I found you at last! But what are you doing here?" His voice distant, his light dimming.

"Don't worry, everything will be all right," Ayodé said soothingly. "The bishop thinks I poisoned you, but when they discover the truth, they'll have to set me free and –"

"That monster!" Leandro interrupted. "He told me yesterday he was using this cell to torture heretics. I knew I shouldn't have believed him! I must stop him!"

"We must break the curse first so that you can return to your body," Ayodé glanced at the book on her lap.

"The codex!" Leandro said in surprise. "Have you found anything in it?" He reached for the book and something previously hidden began to take

shape on the pages under Leandro's light. They watched silently as letter after letter appeared.

May your soul wander on endless shores,
Deprived of stars and without dawn – alone, alone!
Until there's one who'd sacrifice
Their golden days, their tears and smiles – for you, for you!

The blood ran out of their faces as they looked at each other – they both understood the price for breaking the curse.

"There must be another way!" cried Leandro. "If you can see me, surely others can too, and I can find someone who can help us!"

But Ayodé knew in her heart that she was the only one who could set her beloved free. Before Leandro could say any more, they heard footsteps in the passage and the wind blew his shining figure into tiny sparkling specks. Then the golden cape of the bishop appeared in front of the bars, followed by his guards.

"Well, well! If it isn't the town's favourite healer! And with her latest patient lying half-dead in his bed," the bishop mocked to his soldiers. "I would never have thought he would be defeated by the blade of a pirate sword … Or is he dying of the poison you put in his infusion? Oh, don't worry, I know it wasn't you. No, it was the hooded woman from the forest people my guards saw running away from the palace. You must know her? After all, you were raised by them, weren't you? Don't try to deny it – nobody comes to my town without me finding out where they've come from or what they want!"

The bishop grasped the bars of the cell. His voice echoed around the walls. "You have a choice. You either tell us where that poisoner is hiding or I will make an example of you to those vermin. Either way, one of you

will burn at the stake tonight.” He laughed malevolently, a spray of his cold saliva hitting her face.

Ayodé turned her back on the bishop and hoped Neshí was far away. She repeated the lines from the codex silently to herself, imagining Leandro returning to his body. Then she stood up, turned and grabbed the bars above the bishop’s sweaty hands. Leaning in very close, Ayodé looked deep into his eyes and spoke in a voice that seemed to reverberate down the whole passageway: “Enjoy your stolen treasures while you can. Your punishment will come earlier than you think!”

Gritting his teeth, the bishop tried to hold Ayodé’s gaze. But something about the fire in her eyes, made him step back. “What is this now, some kind of prophecy?” For a moment, he betrayed his fear, but soon blustered on, “It doesn’t matter. I will show this godforsaken town what happens to people who oppose me! If you will not give up your friend, so be it. You will burn instead! The flames will be visible everywhere from the harbour. Even the forest people will know that in this town, everything is mine. You understand me? *Everything!*”

He motioned to the guards, who opened the cell door. Ayodé let them lead her up to the square in front of the bishop’s palace. They took her to the platform where the stake had been built and bound her with tight ropes that cut into her flesh as a crowd gathered around in shock.

But Ayodé no longer felt anything as the guards poured oil down her neck and onto the branches piled up at her feet. The bishop was making a speech from his balcony at the palace, but nobody was listening. They were all watching Ayodé, who smiled brightly at the crowd and her frightened friends. An uneasy silence descended. In the past, Ayodé had eased their pain, healed their sickness or simply listened to their troubles. They looked at her gratefully, like the old fisherman had done that morning. He too was standing in the crowd, leaning heavily on a stick, along with Delia and

Valross, who watched despairingly as a guard walked toward the stake, torch in hand.

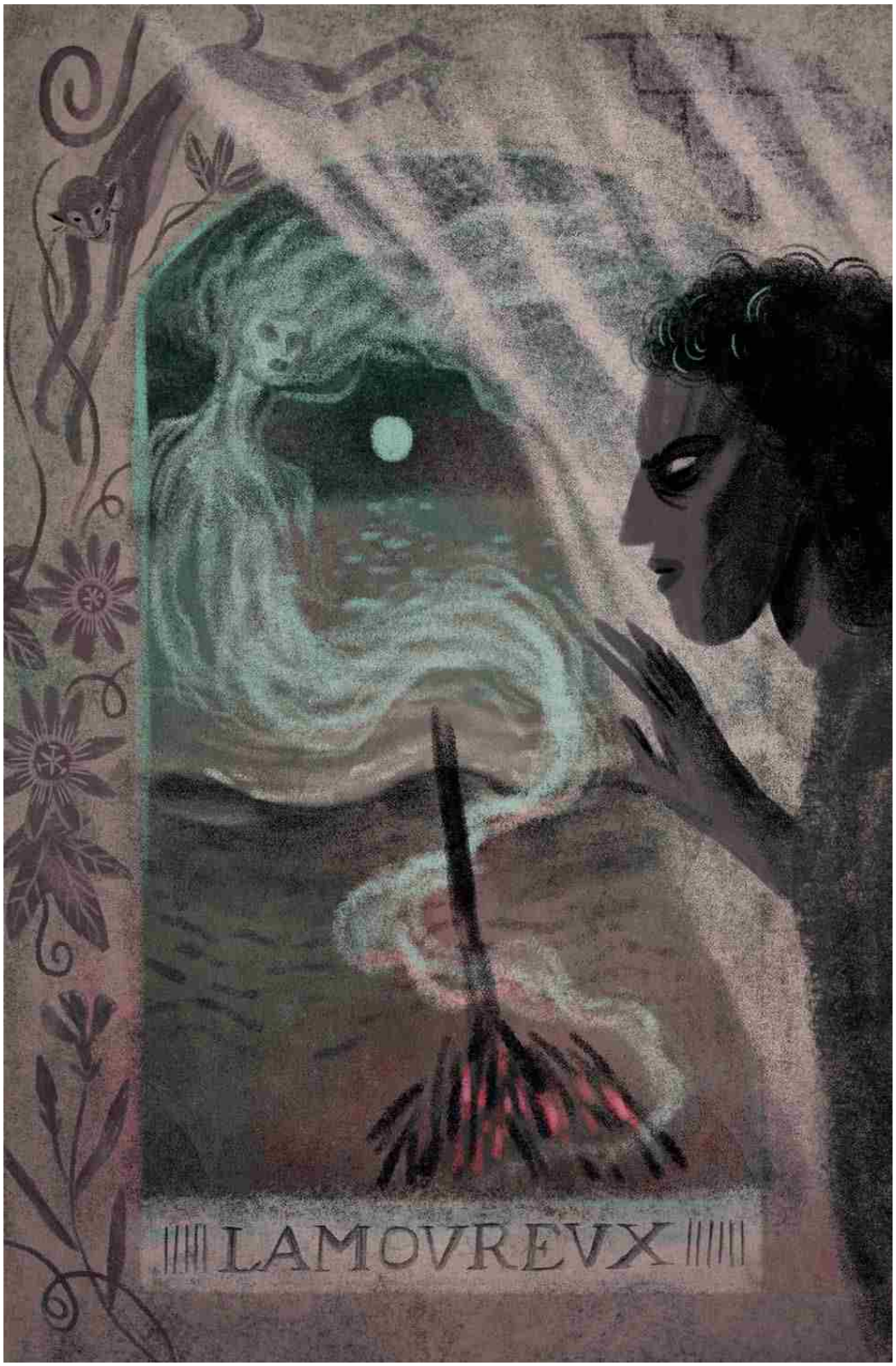
Ayodé looked out toward the sea, where the setting sun was kissing the waves. Ships rocked gently in the port as the twigs at her feet caught fire and crackling flames began to spread to the thicker branches. White smoke rose from the burning wood and the sun sank into the horizon as the red glow of the fire clouded her vision.

The curtain of flames gradually hid her friends' faces, the yellow houses and flower-covered balconies, the port, the ships and finally even the town, as if everything had been consumed by the fire. All that remained was the heat of the flames as the sparks joined together before her. Leandro's shining figure floated closer and he pulled her into his arms. Ayodé closed her eyes and felt his kiss just like the night before, and she knew the curse had been broken. She was filled with love. The flames rose higher and higher, enveloping her, and the flying sparks sprinkled the moonlit sky with stars.

Leandro woke up alone in the dark room. "Ayodé!" he whispered, as the horror of her sacrifice slowly dawned on him. He looked out over the town. Silver clouds floated in the sky and he could see the stake still glowing in the square. Its smoke swirled upward as if searching for the moon, lost in the mist of the stars.

Leandro felt the warmth in his physical body, but as the tears of unbearable grief streamed down his face, a cold irrepressible anger rose in him. Numb and barely conscious of his actions, he grabbed a rusty dagger to hunt down the man who had taken his love and happiness.

It didn't take him long. He watched with grim satisfaction as the life drained out of the pleading, cowardly bishop until his hot blood turned the stolen gold around his neck a fiery, flaming red.


LAMOVREVX

VII

Alchemists

AYODÉ RETURNED TO THE SKY every night to watch over Leandro's sleep until the day came when they were united again. It is worth talking more here about those who master the transformations of body and soul – the alchemists. There are surprisingly many parallels between them and witches, as both have knowledge that remains hidden from others and they are therefore often seen as outsiders. Perhaps they are, for they seek the secrets of nature and work with forces invisible to many. It is no wonder that alchemists have kept their most important discoveries to themselves, just as witches do not necessarily share their knowledge.

Alchemists have been around throughout history and they are still among us. My master was an alchemist, just like Maria Prophetissa, Abu Bakr al-Razi, Sun Bu'er and John Dee. Since the day I gave up being a trickster and she took me under her wing, I've never seen the world in the same way again.

Kings and merchants think that alchemists, like them, only strive for material wealth. They often imprison those who fail to fill their pockets with gold and chances are that these alchemists will never escape from their dungeons. Then the rulers simply return to their traditional methods of exploitation to get what they want.

From the *Prima Materia* – the whirling multiplicity of possibilities – certain transmutations help us to create the *lapis philosophorum* or Philosophers' Stone, the tool or device for making gold. This is the *Magnum Opus*, the Great Work, and gold is only one of its symbols. The steps to achieve this are *nigredo, albedo* (as we have seen in the first seven chapters) and

rubedo. However, although most alchemists do try to create physical gold, many also strive to elevate body, soul and spirit onto a higher level.

Fang

AREA China

LIVED 1st century BCE

TALE Fang, whose given name has not been preserved by sources, learned the science of alchemy during the rule of Emperor Wu of Han. She was the first female alchemist in China and legend says she could turn mercury into silver. Even her husband envied her for this ability. He tried to threaten her to make her reveal how she did this but to no avail – Fang did not give up her secret.

In China, alchemy focuses on purifying the body, the mind and the spirit. Its purpose is to promote a long and healthy life and balance *qi* or the life force through the practice of qigong. Chinese alchemy also involves the consumption of various potions and elixirs to achieve bodily and spiritual immortality. *Waidan* or external alchemy focuses on elixirs made from minerals such as cinnabarite and realgar, as well as herbs and animal substances, while *Neidan* or internal alchemy teaches meditational and visualization techniques and exercises in breathing and posture.

Cleopatra the Alchemist

AREA Alexandria, Egypt

LIVED *c.*3rd–4th century CE

TALE Cleopatra is the pseudonym of an unknown alchemist and author, one of the few besides Maria Prophetissa who knew the secret of the Philosophers' Stone. Three of her manuscripts have survived, perhaps the most famous being the one about creating gold. This work contains mostly alchemical symbols, such as an image of an Ouroboros – a serpent biting its own tail – with the following words in the centre of the circle: "The All is One." The concept of rebirth has remained an important idea among alchemists throughout the ages. Cleopatra's name was still known in 17th-century Europe, when alchemy was flourishing on the Continent.

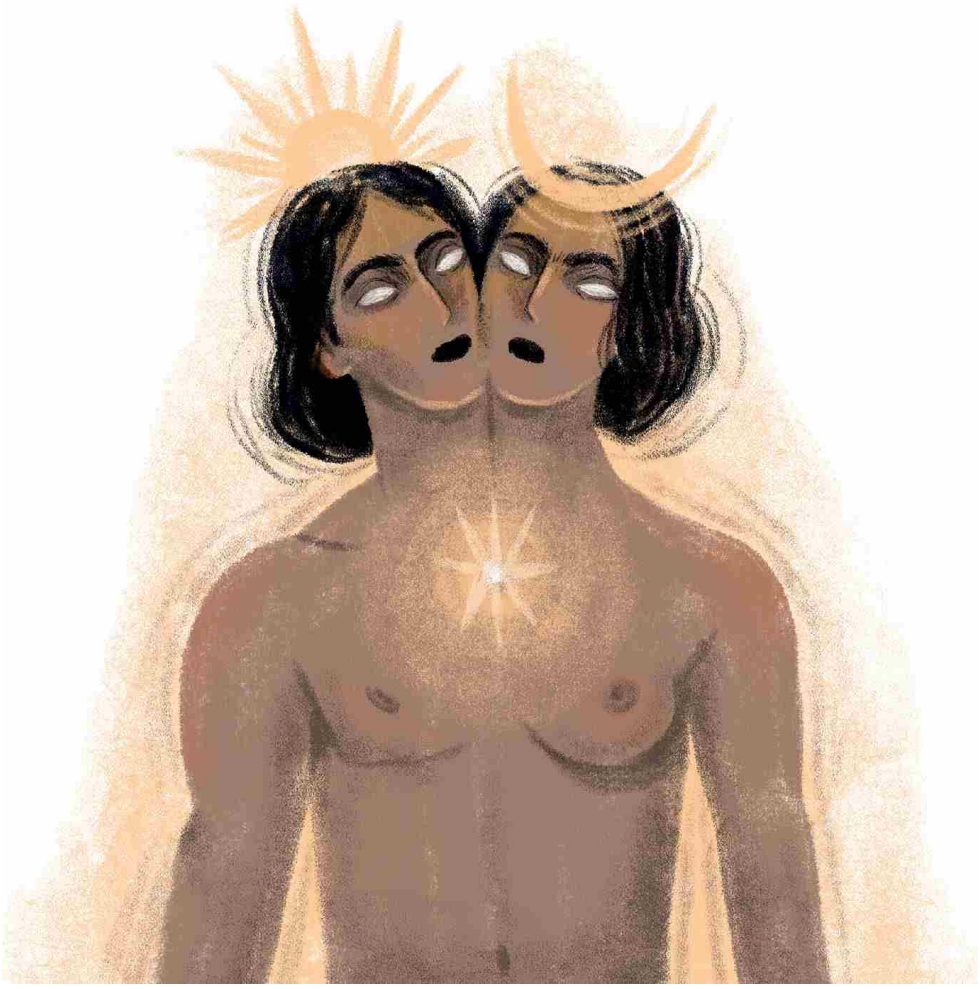
Maria Prophetissa

AREA Alexandria, Egypt

LIVED *c.*1st–3rd century CE

TALE The Emerald Tablet, one of the most important works of alchemy and Hermeticism, is attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, a mysterious figure shrouded in legend. We also know very little about Maria Prophetissa. Zosimos of Panopolis, the alchemist and author from the 3rd century CE, claims that Maria lived in Alexandria, Egypt, and like many other alchemists strove to turn base metals into gold. However, those who are familiar with the theses attributed

to Maria know that her goal was a much higher one. Rather than seeking material wealth, she and her followers worked for the transmutation of body, mind and spirit: “Join the male and the female and you will find that which is sought.” Zosimos claims that besides her theses, she also created several alchemical tools, such as the bain-marie, a double boiler that carries her name and is still widely used in cooking today.



Master Geng

AREA China

LIVED 10th century

TALE Geng Xiansheng, also known as Master Geng, was the Chinese Emperor’s court alchemist. She distilled perfumes and utilized an early form of the Soxhlet method – an extraction process involving camphor and alcohol – that was only discovered in Europe in 1879. Legend has it that the Emperor once asked Master Geng if she could turn mercury into silver without the heat of flames. He wanted to challenge her, knowing that she used fire in all her experiments. She replied that it might be possible and duly passed the test without even touching the mercury. Staring at the precious metal in awe, the Emperor never questioned her expertise again.

Isaac Newton

AREA England

LIVED 4 January 1643–31 March 1727

TALE Although Isaac Newton is revered as the great physicist and mathematician who discovered gravity and made definitive breakthroughs in the fields of mechanics, astronomy and optics that form the basis of modern physics, he also had a little-known but keen interest in alchemy. According to the economist John Maynard Keynes, who owned some of Newton’s alchemical manuscripts, the scientist should not be considered the first voice of the age of reason (as we regard him today) but the last of the magicians. Newton translated the

Emerald Tablet into English but he made sure to keep his work secret from his colleagues. He had good reason to do so because during the Scientific Revolution, space was decreasing for thinkers like him who were convinced that the boundary between the natural and the supernatural is not as rigid as rational science assumes.

Sun Bu’er

AREA China

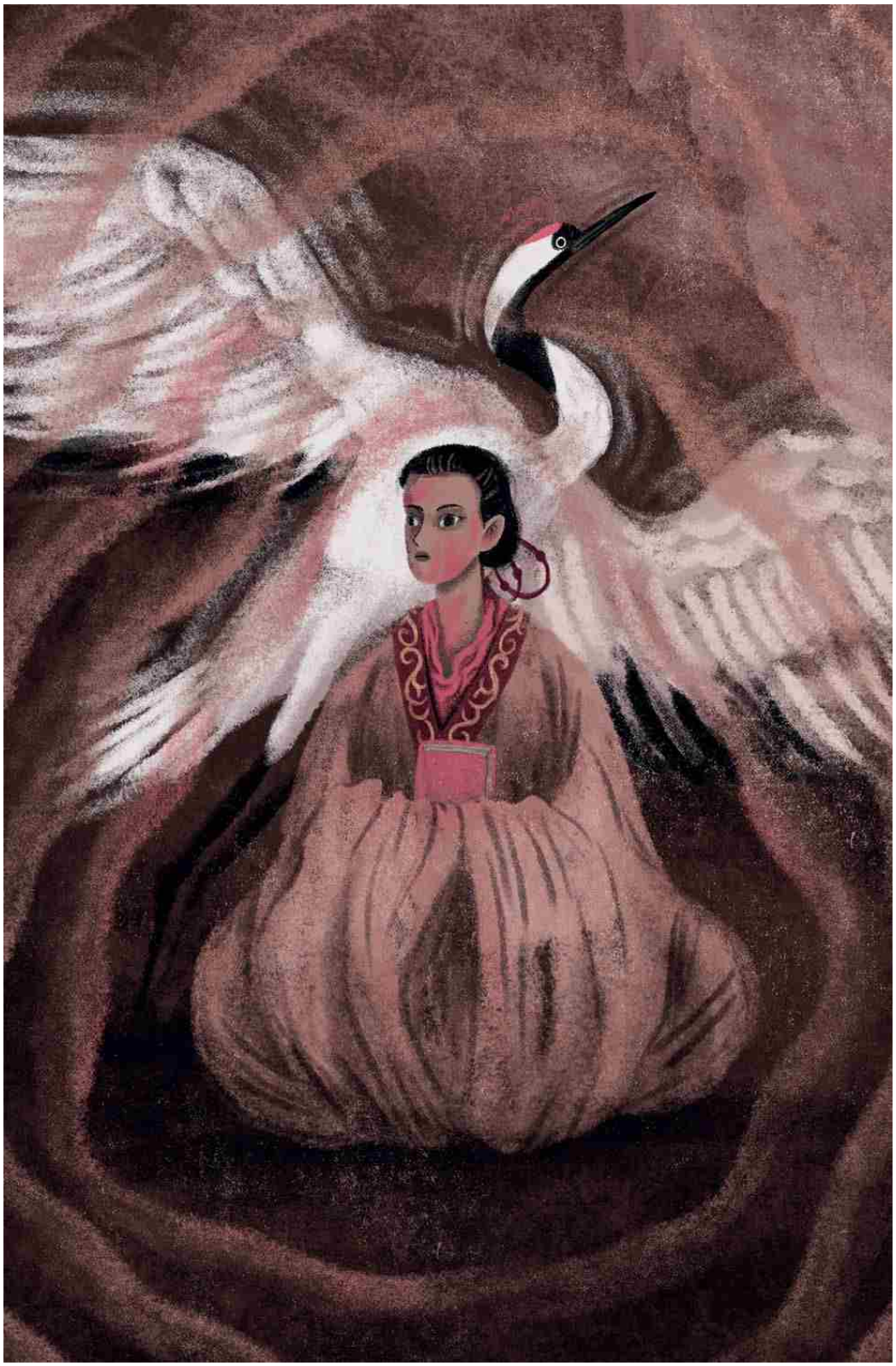
LIVED *c.*1119–1182

TALE Sun Bu’er was one of the Seven Immortal Masters of the Taoist Quanzhen School. Some say that before her conception her mother dreamed of seven cranes, which were considered a symbol of immortality. Six of them flew away, but one entered her mother’s body. Sun Bu’er lived in China in the 12th century in the Eastern province of Shangdong. She had three children of her own when she decided to join her husband, who was already a disciple of the Taoist master Wang Chongyang. This was quite controversial at the time, as she was supposed to be a wife and mother. Not only did she defy these customs, she became one of the “Seven Perfected”, giving hope to other women to follow their spiritual calling.

Sun Bu’er was so devoted to her path that she even destroyed her own beauty. She splashed boiling oil on her face, so that men would no longer desire her and she could travel without fear of assault on her journey from

Shangdong to Luoyang, where she founded the Purity and Tranquility School.

We know of 14 poems she wrote on the relationship between the flow of *qi* or life force and mental and physical balance, and she also offered advice on eliminating menstrual pain.



John Dee

AREA England and Central Europe

LIVED 13 July 1527–*c.*1608

TALE John Dee was one of the most famous European alchemists of the 17th century. As well as being well versed in mathematics, astrology and other sciences, he was also an advisor to Queen Elizabeth I (r.1558–1603). Besides natural sciences, he immersed himself in Hermeticism, as well as studied alchemy and the Hebrew Kabbalah. After meeting the medium Edward Kelley, he dedicated the last 30 years of his life to contacting angels. During their seances, he wrote down the messages from Kelley that came in a language later known as Enochian. However, one of his most important works was the creation of the famous alchemical symbol the Monas Hieroglyphica, which details a method to restore the physical, mental and spiritual balance of our fragmented world.

Abu Bakr al-Razi

AREA Persia

LIVED *c.*854–935

TALE Physician, philosopher and alchemist, al-Razi was one of the most famous scientists of the Islamic Golden Age. His contemporaries respected him highly for the successes he achieved in healing and he was also known to be interested in making gold. Once, a general confronted him

in public when he was helping the poor, asking al-Razi whether he treated them without charge because he had found the secret of transmuting base metals into gold. He answered that he had been studying the characteristics of metals for a long time but had not found any proof that creating gold or silver was feasible. Naturally, the general had meant the precious metal gold and this was what al-Razi was referring to in his answer. Then al-Razi turned back to his patients who smiled at him gratefully, knowing that he had a heart of gold and wouldn’t have any use for material transmutation.

NOW IT IS TIME TO FOCUS on spiritual alchemy, as we have crossed the imaginary border between the material and the ethereal spheres. Our left foot stands on earthly soil, our right foot in stardust, and we cannot ignore either for the sake of the other. The body is just as important as the spirit, and once we accept our dual nature, we can start the process of *fermentation*. This is the last step of *albedo*, after which we shall enter the last phase – *rubedo* or reddening. To get there we need to think like a winemaker. The process of turning grape juice into wine is an example of *fermentation*. With the addition of yeast to the juice, the sugars in grapes are converted into ethanol, an essential component of wine. This is a very delicate process and the proportions and timing must be perfect to achieve the quality we strive for. Think of grapes as our body and yeast as our soul – on their own they are quite ordinary but together they are capable of creating something truly remarkable.

Our next tarot card is The Chariot, which signifies that we are close to a breakthrough. The driver has two horses – his body and his soul. He steers them with a steady hand, following the guidance of the stars. Whatever obstacles he faces, he has the strength to overcome them. Instead of rushing his horses, he approaches his goal carefully, because he knows that timing is more important than speed.

However, there are those who believe that time itself is an illusion, another one of the veils. But I will let you decide for yourself whether this is true or not as you read the story of Snofru, Isaac and Alice!

Lute Play

THERE WAS HARDLY any smoke filtering through the blanket when Isaac finally made himself face the damage. He lifted it carefully and looked through the glowing ash at the manuscripts that had been burned. The desk was covered in blackened pieces of paper and the brass candelabra that Diamond had knocked over. Isaac knew he only had himself to blame – why had he let the dog into the study? Now, nothing was left of years of work except some charred scraps of paper. The only treatise he had managed to save was one describing the magical proportions of the pyramids.

“Oh Diamond, little do you realize the damage you have done,” he told the dog, who had been watching from the corner and had only now plucked up the courage to come closer to her master.

“Thank goodness you didn’t jump up among the flasks – that would’ve caused a mighty explosion, you naughty girl! I know you can’t help it.” He petted the head of the scruffy dog. The wind blew the smoke out onto the London street but he knew he would be smelling burned paper for days. The lost manuscripts would haunt him for years. Nevertheless, he was already considering how to make up the lost time.

“Let’s look on the bright side! Fire always gives birth to new things, doesn’t it Diamond?”

He grabbed a fistful of ashes and strode over to the table at the other end of the room, which was covered with flasks. The dog followed him eagerly. She liked to watch her master turn the room rainbow-coloured with a prism

or mix new powders into bubbling solutions. Isaac sprinkled the dust into a vial and mixed it with an amalgam of mercury and gold.

“Those idiots in Cambridge are so afraid of these experiments that they might burn us too, if they found out what we’re doing. So, not a word to anyone about what we’re up to, right?” he said to the dog, holding the amalgam in his skilful hands.

“I know what they’re whispering behind my back! ‘Newton has gone completely crazy. He has been fooled by the tricks of those impostors!’ To hell with them! They don’t understand a thing! Finally, I have time to bring the Philosophers’ Tree to life, thanks to you, you giddy little creature!”

Diamond raised her head to be stroked but Isaac pulled away his mercury-tainted hand, so she had to make do with a friendly smile.

“Ready! Now we dip it into *aqua fortis*, and if all goes well, it will turn into crystal during the night. I hope it’ll grow branches longer than ever!”

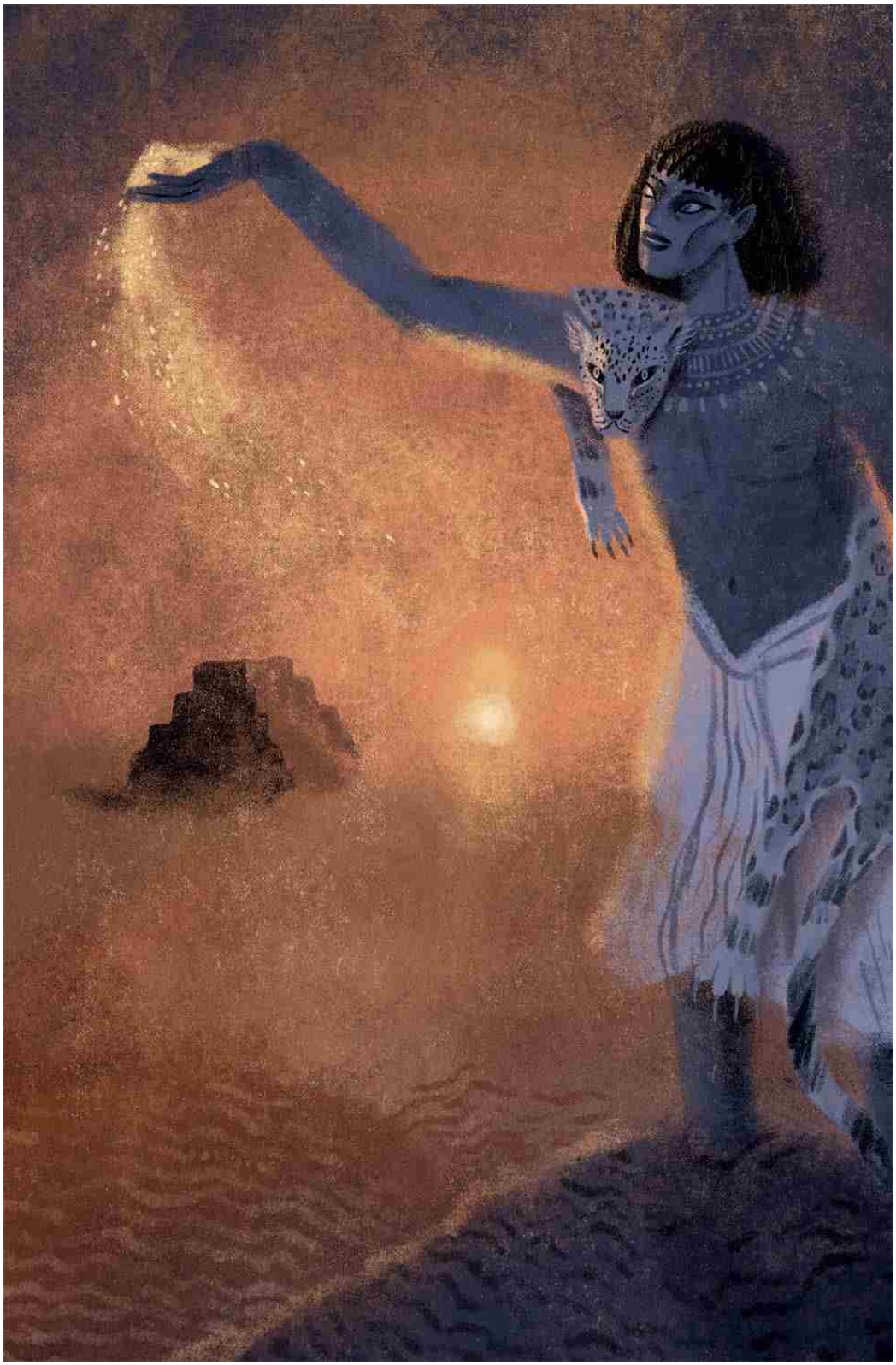
He dipped the amalgam into the transparent liquid and double-checked that he had blown out all the candles in the room. “Come on, you little troublemaker, let’s have dinner!”

Isaac waited until Diamond sped out toward the kitchen, then looked back at the soot-black desk. He tried to estimate how many manuscripts he had lost, but soon gave up and followed Diamond instead.

What’s keeping him? Snofru thought and eyed the plans for the pyramid excitedly. A few minutes before, he had erased the steps on the side and drawn two perfectly straight lines from the foundations to the top. He drummed his fingers impatiently on the papyrus scroll, then, having had enough of waiting, grabbed the plans and left the construction supervisor’s tent. His sandals sank into the sand of the dunes. He looked over at his subjects who were working on the seven-floor pyramid. *Like ants*, he thought and was filled with pride at the sight of the nimble hands working

on their pharaoh's tomb so early in the morning. *And it'll be even more magnificent with Anubis's innovation!* he mused.

He noticed his councillor struggling to climb the steep side of the dune, adjusting the apron he had hurriedly put on. *I must have woken him up*, Snofru thought. He looked toward the Nile where a colony of ibises was rising from the reeds at the call of dawn. *We couldn't have chosen a better place*, he decided.



“You called for me, Your Majesty?” the panting councillor said, interrupting Snofru’s thoughts.

“How is the construction going?”

“We shall be ready for the Beautiful Festival of the Valley, as you wished!”

“Forget that celebration, my friend!”

“I beg your pardon, Your Majesty?”

“The plans have changed. Look!” He unrolled the papyrus scroll and motioned to the councillor to sit down with him on the sand. Snofru was curious to hear what he’d say about the straight-sided pyramid.

“This is marvellous, Your Majesty!”

“I knew you’d like it. But can you do it?”

“We will have to reconstruct the seven steps so the pyramid will have four smooth sides, just like the capstone. It won’t be easy, Your Majesty,” the councilor replied.

Snofru laid his hand on his shoulder. “Don’t worry, you’ll get everything you need – people, materials, time. But this plan must be followed.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. It looks as if it was planned by the gods!”

“You have no idea how close you are to the truth.”

Alice was about to open her colleague’s door when she heard the familiar sighs. *He’s stuck again*, she thought and pulled her hand back from the door handle. Gathering some strength from the aroma of coffee in her cup, she entered the senior research physicist’s office.

“What’s up?” she asked.

Bob leaned back in his chair and covered his face with his hands. “Don’t even ask! You know how close I am to solving the quantum eraser problem, but I slept so badly that I’ve just been staring at my papers since

this morning.” Bob leaned forward and took the coffee from Alice’s hand. But as soon as he lifted it to his lips, he grimmaced and put it down on the table.

“You don’t even want coffee?” Alice said. “There must be something seriously wrong!”

“Food poisoning. Must have been yesterday’s lunch at that awful cafeteria. I’ll tell them to hire new kitchen staff – we can’t do proper research with that happening!”

“You’re not coming to the party this evening?” Alice asked. “You must have been invited. Our young colleagues know how to have fun on the longest day of the year! This time, they’re recreating the ancient Egyptian Festival of the Valley. There’ll be music, paper lanterns, falafel … It’s all happening here in the park, so we won’t even have to go far. You should come – it’d mean a lot to them to finally see you outside your ivory tower!”

“Thanks but you know how much I hate these social things. And my stomach can’t handle anything tonight. Have I told you how badly I slept? I even had a dream! That burrito must have been really bad. Did you eat one?”

“No, my husband cooked. What did you dream about?”

“Some total rubbish. It was night, a figure was sitting on a rock and playing the lute but I couldn’t hear it at all. As I got closer, I saw that he was wearing a mask.”

“What kind of mask?”

“Like one of those Venetian carnival ones. It was half human and half – maybe jackal? I don’t remember exactly. Anyway, he was playing the lute but it was silent. I didn’t even see his eyes but I knew he was watching. Perhaps waiting for something? Who knows. Then he stopped playing and raised a hand toward the mask …”

Diamond was looking for the monsters that made her master's sleep so troubled in the dark room. Finally, the growling woke Isaac, who jumped out of bed. He clearly remembered the figure in his dream removing the jackal-like mask and revealing the noble features of a pharaoh. The silhouette of pyramids was in the background. Then the pharaoh had taken up a lute and started playing. Isaac had never heard such a wonderful tune and began humming it to himself so he'd remember it.

Diamond waited at his feet but Isaac had been so mesmerized by the dream that he forgot about her. *A pharaoh, on a lute?* he wondered. Then more images flooded back to him from this strange vision. The figure had played with more passion. The magical tune raised the wind, picking up grains of sand. Isaac had felt the wind catch his hair as he fell into golden grains of sand, taking all kinds of shapes before returning to his human form.

He lit a candle on his bedside and ran into the study. The Philosophers' Tree had sprouted more branches and was now reaching to the top of the flask. The crystals seemed to grow bigger and reflected the candlelight all around the room. In the kaleidoscopic patterns on the wall, Isaac sensed a system that showed the solutions to his lost theses and answers to mysteries he had not even started to work on.

Diamond stared worriedly at her master, whose eyes sparkled with the elation of new discoveries. That could only mean one thing for her – there was no chance of getting breakfast today.

Snofru pulled his councillor closer and started retelling his dream.

"I was walking alone in the starry night when I noticed a figure playing the lute on top of a dune. The tune attracted me, then I realized it was Anubis himself playing the instrument. When he saw me, he stopped

playing and called out to me. ‘Come here, Snofru, lay down by my side and I shall make you greater even than Imhotep!’

I stretched out next to him on the dune and together we watched the stars covering Nut’s body in the sky. ‘Marvellous, isn’t it?’, Anubis said. ‘Yet there was a time when the goddess of the sky was even more amazing than this. A long time ago, her whole body was covered in a veil of stars, woven so tightly that there was not a single gap. Eternal light and silence covered the world, no past or future, just one single shining moment. The gods lived in perfect harmony but Hathor felt something was missing. She decided to end the monotony of the frozen moment. She created a lute – like this one, see? When she struck the first chord, Nut awoke from her sleep. The goddess of the sky looked down on Hathor and waited for the next sound. Hathor continued playing and a tune grew out of it that you humans have been trying to imitate ever since.

Nut’s admiration grew, and soon the first star dropped from her body. Hathor played with growing passion and Nut’s elation made more stars fall to the ground. Had Ra not intervened, perhaps all the stars would have fallen. Ra blew the wind of omniscience over the goddesses and they both fell asleep. Ra stared curiously at the stardust covering the ground and wondered what to do with the golden crystals. He turned the brightest ones into the sun, then formed people, animals and plants.’

Finally, he said: ‘Let there be change!’ Humming Hathor’s tune, he set the chariot of the sun in motion, which has maintained the world’s eternal cycle ever since.

Then Anubis looked at me, took up his lute and started playing. I realized that the desert sand, the palm leaves and even those ibises flying over the Nile are all made of stardust,” Snofru finished.

The councillor slowly reached toward the sand, then jerked back his hand.

“Go ahead, my friend,” Snofru said. He took the councillor’s hand and dipped it into the golden sea of sand. The councillor looked at the tiny grains in his palm with awe.

Snofru leaned over to him and pointed at one of them. “Do you see that bigger diamond-shaped one that hasn’t yet been worn down?”

“Yes.”

“What does it remind you of?”

“The new plan!”

“That’s right. I have turned Imhotep’s seven-story pyramid into a perfect crystal shape, like this grain of sand used to be when it was shining in the sky.”

The councillor tipped his hand sideways. As the grains of sand poured away, Snofru went on.

“With time, everything turns into sand. Even our mummies will become dust again so that Ra can fashion them into new shapes. Who knows, one day we might become stars on Nut’s veil again!”

“Did you recognize the person behind the mask?” Alice asked.

“No, I didn’t. He looked familiar but you know how bad I am at remembering faces. He reminded me of an old English guy from a few hundred years ago. But there were shiny crystals growing out of his body – they were pulsing like a lung that expands when you inhale and then contracts when you exhale. What on earth was in that burrito?”

“Have you dreamed anything like this before? I wonder what it could mean.”

“That’s the kind of stuff my wife asks – you know she’s a violinist, and that’s what musicians are like. But you work at the most advanced research institute in Europe, so what’s with the woo-woo questions? My stomach was upset, that’s all.”

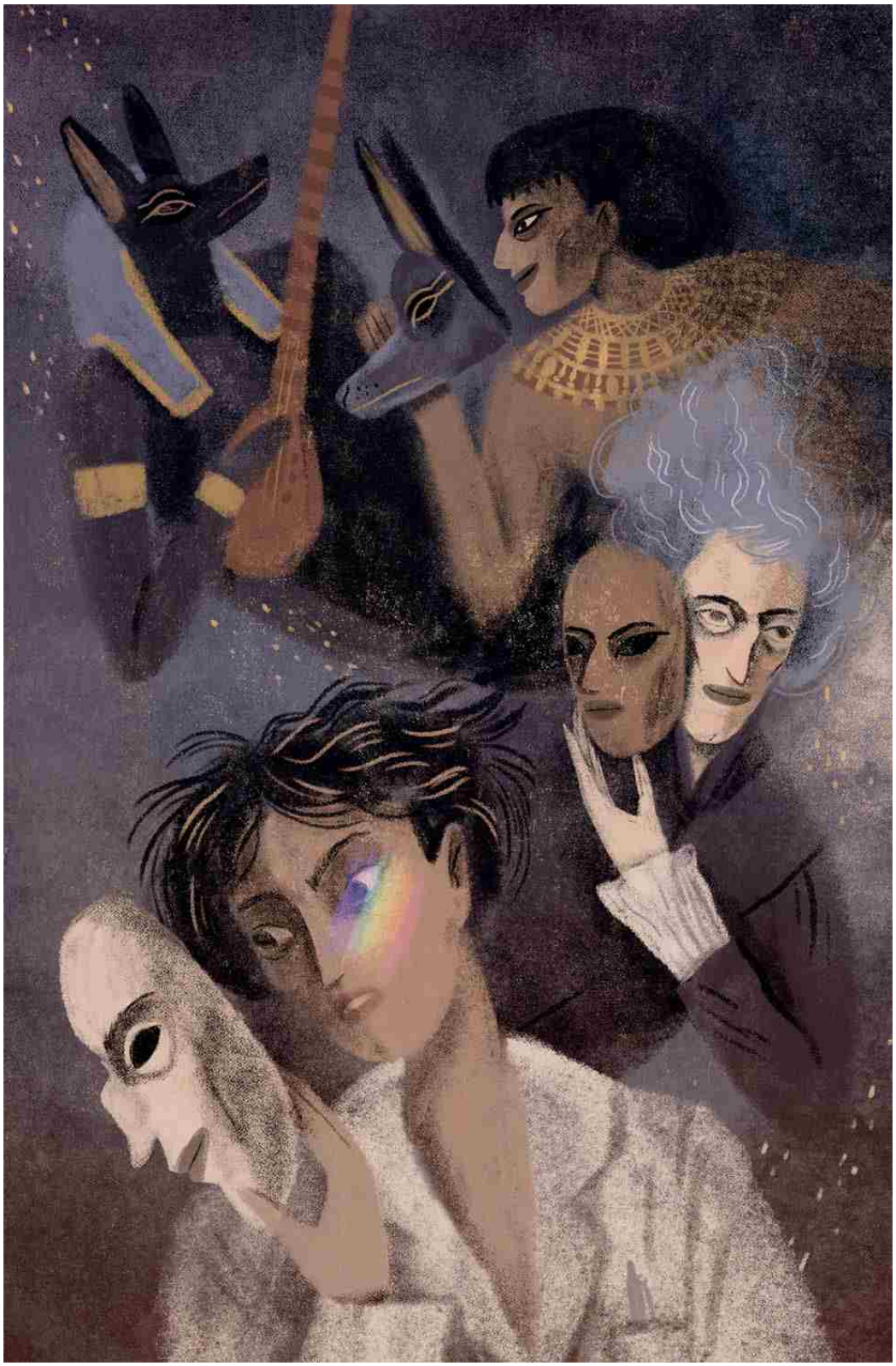
“OK, so what happened next?”

“The figure put the mask back on his face then I woke up, thank goodness. I made a nice strong coffee but of course my stomach couldn’t take it, so I came in to work on the quantum eraser problem. I know I’m close to a breakthrough but I’ve checked the results three times and something still doesn’t add up. I don’t even know whether the experiments were flawed or the theory itself is wrong. Hey, would you look over everything for me? You might be able to spot where I’ve gone wrong. There must be an error somewhere. So far, I’ve proven that future events may influence the past,” Bob pretended to laugh, like someone who knows they’ve just told a bad joke. “Here’s the research material – there’s a lot, but you already know the gist.” He adjusted the papers and handed them to Alice.

“Sure, I’ll look at it. Go home and rest – you might dream of a solution overnight!”

“Very funny. There must be a simple explanation that doesn’t go against all the laws of thermodynamics. Anyway, good luck!”

Alice looked at the sheets she had been given. The title, *A Delayed Choice Quantum Eraser Experiment,* said it all. It was going to be a long night. She tucked the thick folder under her arm, picked up Bob’s untouched coffee and went back to her office.



Alice woke up to distant music. For a moment, she thought she was still lying among the dunes. But she soon became aware that the last page of the experiment's research material was stuck to her face. She'd fallen asleep in the office. She slowly raised her head from the desk and put the sheet of paper back on the pile. She realized she was still humming the tune from her sleep. She had to tell Bob what she'd heard. Without checking how late it was, she dialled his number.

"Bob? I've checked and you won't believe it. The tune, the masked figure, that is, Newton –"

"Alice?" he interrupted. "Slow down, I'm not following. Start again …"

"Your calculations are correct! There are no mistakes," she said.

"That's impossible, you must have missed something too."

"I haven't Bob, I'm sure! Look, it's true that the future doesn't influence the past. It's much weirder than that! The change we experience as time only makes sense to us. There are sensations and information that aren't affected by it!"

"Are you out of your mind? What you're saying goes against everything we've ever known. And why did you mention Newton of all people?"

"Could you really not hear what he played on the lute? It was marvellous!"

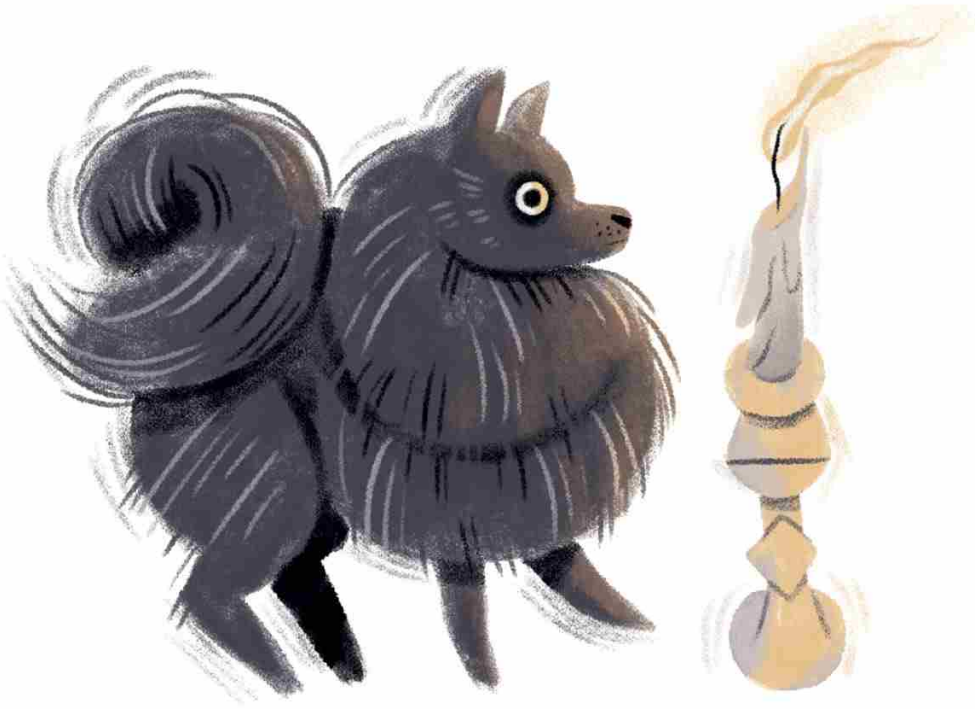
"I think you've lost the plot! Get some sleep, Alice. It sounds like you need it. You must have eaten some of that cafeteria food too. I'll talk to the catering staff first thing tomorrow. Good night!" He hung up.

Alice threw down the cell phone. *Why can't he understand?* she wondered and stared angrily at the phone. Then she heard the magical tune again, this time interspersed with familiar laughter and realized she was no longer recalling a dream.

She ran to the open window and looked out. Colourful lanterns hung on the trees in the park, showering everyone in the hues of the rainbow. The night filled with the exquisite tune of Alice's dream and she no longer cared

about the calculations. She left her lonely office and hurried outside toward the beautiful lights of the celebration. Nut’s veil shone brightly over the park as she joined her colleagues.

Every star was visible in the sky but two shone with particular intensity. After completing their work on Earth, Snofru and Isaac had indeed earned their places on the goddess’ veil and they had been looking out for fellow dreamers ever since. Now they watched Alice with joy, for they had found someone who could hear the melody of Hathor and rejoiced in the timeless harmony of change. They knew that Alice would be the next to deliver Anubis’ message – if she could find anyone who still believed in the truth of dreams.



VIII

Revenants

TO BECOME AN ALCHEMIST, all you need is the curiosity and openness that Alice had, to marvel at the multiplicity of possibilities, to let yourself be guided by your imagination and to learn the fundamental laws of the universe.

However, there are also some beings who do not accept the cycle of life, death and rebirth and cling tooth and nail onto life. They stay among us when their time has passed and can be found all around the world in different guises such as the vampires of Europe, the *jiangshi* of China, the *soucouyant* of the Caribbean and the *penanggalan* of the Malay Archipelago. There is no corner of the world that does not know of creatures like them who keep returning from death to quench their insatiable thirst with blood. They hunt during the night and different people protect themselves from them in different ways. For example, the people of the Caribbean pour salt or rice onto thresholds and windowsills to keep away the *soucouyant* because this bloodsucker must count every grain before it is able to pass through. However, as the next chapter demonstrates, such creatures are not all evil and some of them do not even return from the dead of their own free will.

Hazel Witch

TYPE witch

AREA the Südtirol, Italy

POWERS can come to life from bones

TALE

In an alpine village in the Dolomites, a servant sees a stable girl sit on a wooden baking paddle she has smeared with magic ointment and fly out of the house up the chimney. So, the boy grabs a broom, smears it with the same ointment and is soon on his way to the peaks of the Schlern mountain.

There he comes upon the stable girl standing on the foggy mountain in the middle of a circle of dancing witches, who suddenly throw themselves upon her and tear her to pieces. They eat her flesh until only the bones remain. They also throw a rib to the servant boy, who pretends to eat it but hides it in his bag.

After the feast, the witches collect the bones and put a hazel branch in the place of the missing rib to bring the girl back to life. One of them says to the girl: “From now on, your name shall be Hazel Witch! But beware, should anyone call you by that name, you shall die immediately!”

Horrified, the boy decides to expose the witch. Upon returning to the village, while the servants and farm hands are having dinner, he turns to her and asks, “How did you like the roast meat, Hazel Witch?” And the girl falls dead at the table and never dances with her sister witches again.

Jiangshi

TYPE vampire

AREA China

POWERS hopping with arms outstretched

TALE *Jiangshi* are vampire-like beings, who return to the world of the living because of unresolved business. Their bodies are stiff with *rigor mortis*, so they cannot walk but have to hop onto their victims with a characteristic movement, holding their arms outstretched. They look for their victims, mostly humans, at night to suck out their life force. They do not remember their own lives. They have rotting bodies and their skin is pale and greenish due to the mould that covers it. During the day, they hide in a coffin or a dark cave.

A person injured by a *jiangshi* will eventually turn into a *jiangshi* themself, so it is important to know how to protect ourselves against them. They are afraid of light, therefore they do not like the reflective surfaces of mirrors and the flames of fire. When they hear the cock crow at dawn, they return to their hiding place to avoid the light of the rising sun.

In the olden days, when somebody in China died in a faraway place, their relatives could hire a Taoist priest to take them back to their homeland and bury them there. The priest would reanimate the body into a *jiangshi*. They would travel at night and use a bell to signal they were coming, so that people could lock themselves in their houses as seeing a *jiangshi* was considered a bad omen.

Penanggalan

TYPE bloodsucker

AREA South-East Asia, Malay Archipelago

POWERS flying, separating the head from the body

TALE During the day, the *penanggalan* is a beautiful woman with black hair, but after the sun sets, she lies in a bathtub full of vinegar to conserve her body until she returns from the hunt. Her head separates from her torso, pulling out her vertebrae and her entrails to sniff the air. She might sometimes attack men but is mostly attracted to the blood of pregnant women and newborn babies. Some say the *penanggalan* is a woman who died in childbirth and she returns to take revenge on those more fortunate.

When the *penanggalan* goes back to her body and leaves the bath, she again looks human. The only way to spot her is through her distinctive vinegary smell. Anyone whose blood she sucks faces illness and certain death. People hang *jeruju* leaves in their windows because the *penanggalan* is scared of getting her entrails stuck on the thorns. There is only one way to destroy her: sprinkle broken glass in the stomach of the *penanggalan's* body lying in the bathtub while her head is away hunting.

Strzyga/Strzygon

TYPE demon

AREA Silesia, Poland

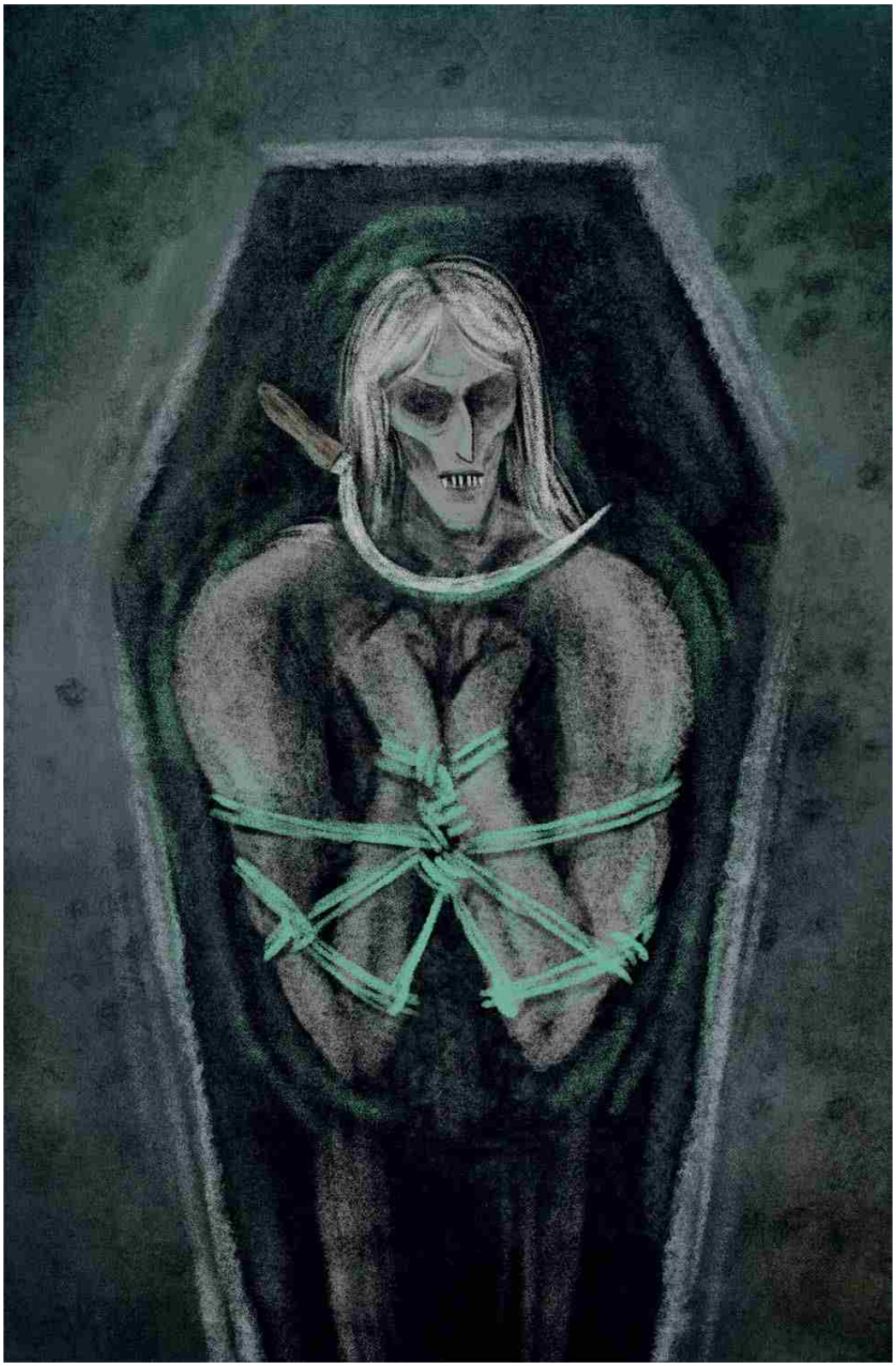
POWERS being born with two souls

TALE If a child is born with a full set of milk teeth or later grows a second set of adult teeth, they are considered to be a vampire-like being with two souls and the ability to return from the dead. If such a baby is born a “cuckoo’s child” (to unmarried parents) or is not baptized, they are even more likely to be labelled a *strzyga* if they are female or a *strzygon* if they are male.

Cracks in the earth over the demon’s grave are a telltale sign that they are out on a night hunt. They assume the shape of an owl to attack lone travelers with a characteristic screech and seeing them is a bad omen. Some say the demon sucks their victim’s blood and spreads illnesses with their breath. Others believe they pick up their life where it ended and when the sun goes down, they cut firewood or look after their animals until the cock crows. If they sleep with their spouse and have a child, their offspring will be as pale and thin as the *strzyga* or *strzygon* risen from the grave.

They cannot find peace until the soul stuck in this world is set free. This is done by unearthing their body and beheading them or placing a sickle on their neck to cut it if they rise again from their grave. Impaling or burning the

demon may also work, and their body is said to turn into tar at the sound of a church bell. If the *strzyga* or *strzygon* is successfully dispatched, they can finally join their other soul in the afterlife.



The Fisherwife of Palermo

TYPE witch

AREA Sicily

TRIAL 1588

TALE The fisherwife of Palermo was an Italian woman put on trial for witchcraft in 1588, whose name was lost to history. This is a fictional retelling of her story based on available sources.

The light breeze from the sea mingled with the fragrant air of the olive grove as the inquisitors arrived at the chapel in Palermo. The one in the red robe watched with disgust as his apprentice bit into a slice of prickly pear. He was suspicious of this sweet fruit from the New World that the people of this island found so delicious. *The Devil's fig*, he thought as they entered the chapel. The wife of a fisherman, who was accused of attending a witches' Sabbath, was already in the interrogation chamber.

The Red Inquisitor asked the woman about the elves and fairies she claimed to see. The woman explained that it had all started when she was a young girl and she had travelled with a group of women, riding on the back of goats, to a vast field called Benevento. When they arrived, they saw a vermilion-coloured boy and a beautiful woman they called the King and Queen of the elves. They told her that she had sweet blood and taught her how to cure the sick.

The Red Inquisitor accused her of worshipping them as gods and she replied that she had knelt before them, then eaten and drunk with some handsome men. He then inferred that she had had intercourse with them and had known that this was a sin. Instead of denying this allegation she explained that she had felt happy and couldn’t wait to go back to them when she woke up in her bed. The inquisitors could hardly believe her story, yet she insisted that it had all been a dream – a sweet dream and nothing more…

Elizabeth Báthory

TYPE countess

AREA Hungary

LIVED 7 August 1560–21 August 1614

TALE Was this aristocrat a vampire who bathed in the blood of virgins, seeking eternal youth? Or simply a noblewoman skilled in the use of medicinal plants, who treated her sick servants herself and became the victim of a show trial because of her wealth? The memory of Countess Elizabeth Báthory is still alive in the mind of Hungarians, thanks to greedy Count Palatine Thurzó, who did everything he could to smear her name. He accused the young widow of murder committed with exceptional brutality after the bodies of some young women were found in the courtyard of her castle in Csejte. He tortured her servants to make them accuse their mistress. He achieved his goal – after

the trial he had Elizabeth locked up in the castle and some say even walled up in a room.

However, Elizabeth garnered an even worse reputation after her death. She was said to have slapped a servant so hard in the face that the girl's blood splashed onto her, making her skin smoother and shinier. Could she have found the magic of eternal youth? Some historians say she did and from then onward bathed in the blood of virgins to counteract the signs of ageing in her body.

Bagolyasszonyka

TYPE spirit creature

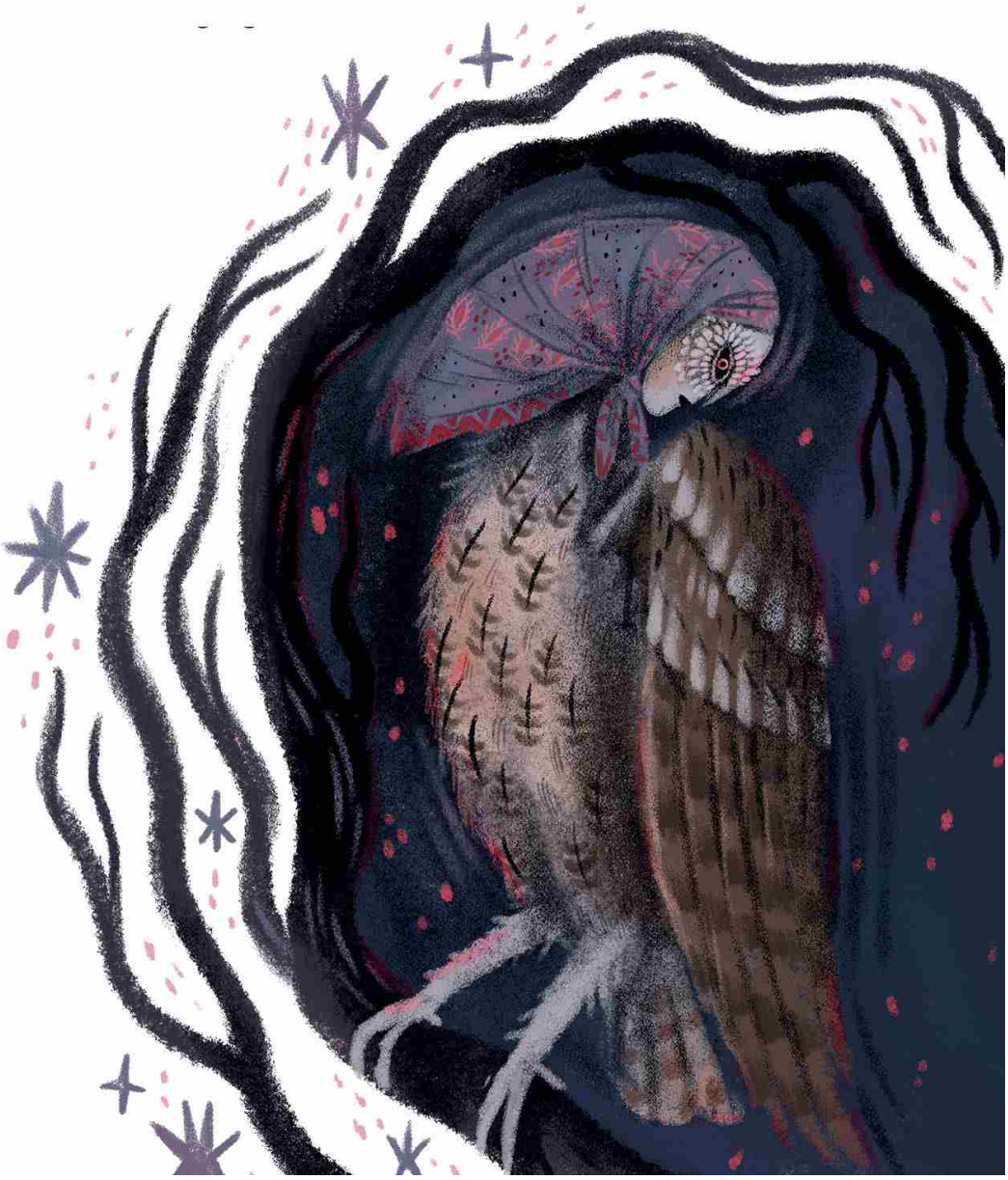
AREA Hungary

POWERS crossing between worlds

TALE *"Oak beam in a deserted mill, that is where owl woman keeps walking and crying still."* This mysterious being haunts us from the ballads of folklore to this day. Crying, the *bagolyasszonyka* or owl woman tells the titmouse about her family and her earthly possessions, which she can never return to again. According to folklore owls bring the souls of newborn children and take away those of the dead.

Could the *bagolyasszonyka* be a spirit creature who is forced to leave everything behind and carry souls back and forth to the otherworld, trapped in a no-man's-land and belonging to neither world? Or is she a woman who faithlessly deserts her family and later regrets it? Or if we

interpret her story in yet another way, with the mill symbolizing the universe, could she be a distant memory of an ancient goddess from a culture long ago? We will never know.



Vampire Gourds

TYPE vampire

AREA the Balkans (Roma people)

POWERS bloodsucking

TALE Vampire gourds are known from the folktales of the Roma people. If someone were to survive their encounter with these terrifying vampires, their account would go something like this:

> “I was woken up by a chilling noise. The cadaverous light of the full moon melted into the barn along with the fog. I listened, paralyzed – hay was rustling in the far corner. There were muffled thumps and then pumpkins and melons started rolling straight toward me. They came closer and closer, bloodstains glistening on them in the pale light. My grandma was right after all. The gourds had turned into vampires! With trembling hands and ready for anything, I grasped the handle of the axe and prepared for the attack of the bloodsuckers …”

Kate Blood

TYPE restless spirit

AREA Appleton, Wisconsin

LIVED 1851–74

TALE Kate or Kitty as she was known, was the daughter of Appleton’s earliest settlers and a beloved member of her community, who died in her twenties from tuberculosis. Her husband laid her to rest at the most peaceful place in the cemetery, far from the other graves. Yet, after her husband’s death, a legend was born based on nothing more than the name on her tombstone: Kate Blood. It claims that she murdered her family with an axe, and if one visits her grave at midnight, one can see an apparition and blood oozing from her tombstone. Soon, people started to believe the legend and call her a witch.

But there are still some who know that honouring the memory of the dead is more important than a sensational story.

Soucouyant

TYPE vampire

AREA Caribbean

POWERS turning into a fireball

TALE An ordinary old woman by day, but at night the *soucouyant* sheds her wrinkled skin and hides it in a mortar to become her true self. She goes hunting in the guise of a fireball and will not stop until she has sucked human blood, leaving a bluish-black mark on her victim. Once she has quenched her thirst, she returns to her own skin, which becomes more and more wrinkled. However, if someone discovers the shed skin in its hiding place and

sprinkles it with salt or pepper, the *soucouyant* perishes in agony when she tries to put it back on. Another method of killing a *soucouyant* is to heap salt or rice on the doorstep and the windowsills of the house. Although the vampire can still get in and suck a victim’s blood, she has to count every grain on the way out before she can pass through. If she does not finish by dawn and the neighbours notice her, they beat her to death or throw her into hot tar. But if she does not get trapped and sucks too much blood from someone, that person may turn into a *soucouyant* too.

REVENANTS OFTEN COME BACK TO LIFE because of unfinished business or because they want to experience something again. But we can also fall into the trap of repeating ourselves if we believe that to succeed in creating the Philosophers' Stone, we should become immaculate crystals ourselves. It is an even bigger mistake to think that we can actually achieve this perfection. The eighth tarot card, Justice, shows this. The scales she is holding in her hand are never completely level, because absolute symmetry is unnatural. Even the Philosophers' Stone has small, intrinsic imperfections, and all its faults have their purpose.

Once we have accepted this, we can finally enter *rubedo,* the last phase of alchemy, which means "redness". The first step of redness is *exaltation*: admire the ever-changing balance of nature and let the cycle of life and death give momentum to the Great Work. Remember that great wine is more than the sum of its components. If you can transmute your body and soul into something more than they were in themselves, then you may already possess the Philosophers' Stone. For now you are ready to learn that this elusive tool is nothing more than the ability to truly change yourself.

All this reminds me of the story of Elizabeth Báthory. Many have told her tale, but nobody like Darvulia, the young dragon sister whose overwhelming vision revealed things about the Blood Countess that very few people know.

Dragon Sister

As the dragon flag of the castle of Nyírbátor came into view, Darvulia intentionally relived the terror of her trance. She recalled the vision over and over again, so she could recount everything to her mistress.

Seeing Darvulia's brooch, the soldiers guarding the gate let her in. She stroked the ornate design of three dragon's teeth – the symbol of the Báthory family. She prayed she was not too late. Her mistress must learn of the curse she would bring upon the world if she carried out her plan and woke the beast!

Entering the castle, Darvulia rushed up to join the other dragon sisters, sensing her mistress's presence nearby. *She's still in the Knights' Hall*, she thought. Images entered her consciousness again, attacking her with such ferocity that she had to hold on to the carved bannister. The vision burned into her memory and she needed to clear her head of it. *Bilyal o paho, sovel e jag, bilyal e vorba, sovel o jilo!* she whispered, making sure nobody could hear – the words were so potent they could knock out even the strongest soldier.

Darvulia was the youngest of the dragon sisters and had absorbed the power of seeing the future far quicker than her peers. Lately, the mistress kept a special eye on her. She might even have been afraid of her. But Darvulia dismissed this thought. She took a deep breath and knocked on the door of the Knights' Hall.

There was no answer, so she opened the door. A long carpet ran from the door to the throne, depicting the embroidered image of Opos, the warrior and legendary ancestor of the Báthorys. He sat astride a white horse, killing a squirming black dragon with his spear. The fire roared in the fireplace, yet Darvulia felt a chill as she approached the high, empty throne at the back of the hall.

The figure standing at the arched window gazed out into the night. A long scarlet cloak hung from her shoulders and her stern features were barely discernible in the firelight.

“You are late,” Anna Báthory said without turning around.

“Forgive me, mistress! I had an important and extraordinary dream,” Darvulia replied.

“Dream?” Anna snapped, spinning round. “What dream could be more important than the ritual we have so long been preparing for? You know full well that nobody has ever attempted to awaken the dragon before! What could take precedence over this?”

Darvulia felt guilty for disturbing her mistress but was desperate to warn her. “Mistress, please, listen to me!” she said. “I know why nobody has attempted what we are planning to do! I have seen what will happen if we succeed!”

Anna looked scornfully at the young witch. Darvulia had only joined the secret order of dragon sisters a mere two years before as the thirteenth member and she had reservations about her.

Anna clenched her hands behind her back and turned back to the window. Wisps of cloud shaded the light of the full moon – its weak rays were not yet strong enough for the role they were destined to play.

“It seems this time the night is on your side. Tell me what you saw, but it had better be important!”

Darvulia recalled the images of the vision and started her account.

We went up into the top hall where our sisters had already prepared the ritual. They lit the candles they had placed around the dragon's skeleton, and the black wax slowly flowed along the branches of the star carved into the floor. I took my place at the thirteenth point of the star and you stood right in front of the giant skull. We began chanting, then stepped closer to the dragon. Silver pitchers in our hands, we poured the fresh blood onto it. The giant vertebrae was soaked in the gift of the living. We kept chanting the spell until the moon listened to our plea and lit up the room to awaken the dragon.

The blood began to steam, covering the bones with a thick haze as the beast slowly came to life. In the semi-darkness, I lost sight of everyone, hearing only their voices. Then a shattering roar shook the castle.

Black scales glittered in the light of the candles, and then we saw the shadow of a huge wing on the floor with sharp claws digging into the stone. Behind the thinning haze rose the face of the dragon, its blood-red eyes scanned us and finally settled on you. You stood tall in his gaze, unmoved. Then he roared again, making the walls shake and our chanting stop. You still kept calm, mistress. You stood in front of the beast, sure that the thirteen-pointed star would protect you. Indeed, he could not escape from the prison it formed. His nostrils flared and he said in a deep, resounding voice, "Opos! Which of you worms smells like Opos?" He leaned close to you and continued. "Was it you who brought me back into this world?"

"Yes, it was!" you replied. "How does it feel to be among the living again?"

"How do you think it feels to return to a place you had finally escaped? How do you think it feels to be torn out of the calmness of death and dragged back into a world where you no longer belong? Who do you think you are to do such a thing?"

“I’m Anna Báthory, mistress of the castle of Nyírbátor, from the clan of Opos the Valiant!”

“Why have you dragged me back into this miserable world?”

“To learn from you the secret of rejuvenation.”

“You wish to learn the secret of eternal life from one who is dead?”

“I know the legend of Opos well. The sacred spear was the only weapon that could wound you, but that has long been lost so now there is nothing to fear. I only need to say the word to end this ritual and send you back to the bottomless pit of oblivion! So, tell me of the blood magic that made you stay young.”

The dragon replied with a deep growl that sounded like a sigh, “You have no idea what you are asking of me, Anna from the clan of Opos. You have no idea of the price of eternal life!”

“How do you think we brought you back to life? Don’t you smell the sea of blood we have sacrificed to enable your return?”

The dragon turned his head in disgust, but then smelled the air and slowly looked down at the pool of blood by his feet. He made a move toward it but as soon as he saw himself reflected, he swiped away the tempting gift. “So, you know it was bloodthirst that kept me alive. But this power has a higher price than you could ever imagine. Thanks to Opos, I got rid of this curse. Yet you want it for yourself? You have no idea what suffering it will bring you!”

“Suffering? Our fleeting little lives are what I call suffering! A mere fifty or sixty years. And in constant fear of the Turkish armies. That is what real suffering is!”

“In 200 years new invaders will come and your home will not exist anymore!” scoffed the dragon.

“Let them come then! I will be here to rule and protect my people!”

The dragon closed its eyes, dismayed. “You understand nothing! But if this is what you desire, so be it! I will give you what you want but you must

send me back to oblivion."

"I give you my word."

"Then listen! The only way to accept the curse of eternal life is by cleansing your soul of all other thoughts and silencing the storm in your head. But beware – should any other thought linger in your mind, no matter how slight it might be, the power I am about to bestow will blind you and burn you up like lightning. Have you fully understood?"

"Yes!"

The dragon hung his head, murmured ancient words over the pool of blood, then breathed over you. The smell of sulfur and camphor swept over the hall and for a moment I felt an infinite power pass across to you. Your face lit up, and you took a deep breath.

"It is done!" the dragon announced. "I have given you what you wanted. Now end this spell and let me rest!"

"No, we are not done yet!" you shouted. "Together we shall chase away the Turks, end their looting and liberate our people. Then I shall unite this war-torn country and, under my rule, it shall have peace, order and freedom forever."

Hearing this, the dragon was overcome with rage. He shook his soot-black head and his scales rose up like shields. "Impossible! How could you accept this boundless power with such treason in your heart? What kind of witchcraft is this?" he roared. "Away with you, vermin!"

He spread his wings and breathed scorching fire at us. At first, the carved star stopped the flames, then the heat melted away the black wax. It would take only moments for him to escape from his prison but we reacted quickly. We stepped on the candles, chanting the ancient spell and suddenly the ritual was over. The dragon drew his last roaring breath, and his bones fell smoking in the middle of the battered star.

After Darvulia finished her account of the vision, Anna's eyes raked hungrily over her. "So, we did manage to bring him back to life." She smiled greedily. "Soon I will have the dragon's power!"

"Mistress, the vision!"

"What about it?"

"The vision told me differently. I sensed the enormous power that you received but eventually you were not able to rejuvenate. There was only one pure soul among us who could truly accept such power," Darvulia said.

Anna scanned the young clairvoyant suspiciously, adjusted her cloak and sat down on the throne, clasping her hands. "Is there a traitor among us?"

"Of course not!"

"Then who is it that wants to deprive me of eternal life?"

"Mistress, you misunderstand me. The dragon's power did indeed enter you but my vision did not end with the ritual! The next images showed me that eight months later, when Elizabeth –"

"Elizabeth?"

"Your daughter, mistress," Darvulia said and pointed to the belt around Anna's scarlet robe. Anna quickly drew her hands into her lap and touched her as-yet un-bloomed stomach.

Then, Darvulia continued her account.

When Elizabeth was born, we believed she was an ordinary child. It was you we believed to have eternal life, and for years we never suspected that someone else had received the dragon's power. But you began to show the passing of time and ten years later, in an exceptionally cold winter … I am sorry, mistress! I saw you on your deathbed and we, your dragon sisters, mourned for days.

The Turkish army came in sweeping waves. The courtyard at Nyírbátor was full of our wounded soldiers arriving on carts. We put up tents to treat them in and the doctor worked day and night to ease their suffering, while the dragon sisters changed their bandages. Most children didn't dare to go close to those tents echoing with painful moans but Elizabeth was insistent on helping.

She impressed everyone as she bustled among the wounded, bringing them water and clean linen. However, as she waited patiently for us to change the blood-soaked bandages, I began to notice her curiosity. She would lean in close and watch the blood ooze from the cut-up flesh the way other children would watch the cherry juice flow from a strudel.

That is when I realized what would happen if we woke the beast tonight. Mistress, your daughter will gain the power of the dragon, and my vision showed the suffering this horrible gift would bring her!

Anna interrupted her retelling of the story. "Elizabeth …" She repeated the name Darvulia said she would give her daughter, and this name overshadowed any questions she had.

"Mistress?"

"So, even after everything, I will die!" she laughed manically.

Darvulia stared speechless at her mistress, but quickly regained her composure, and continued.

I saw that Elizabeth married at a young age, Count Ferencz Nádasdy, the Black Knight of Hungary. The count fought off the invaders successfully but Elizabeth knew that the victories could not last. Eventually, he was brought home from one of the raids with a wound not even the doctor could

heal. After the death of her husband, Elizabeth was left alone to a future where the Turks were a greater danger than ever.

During the last raid, twenty-one janissaries had been captured as prisoners of war, including the one who had inflicted the lethal wound on the Black Knight. Elizabeth wanted to avenge her husband's death and after the funeral she went to decide their fate. She walked slowly past the cells and from behind her black veil, she gazed at the prisoners one by one. They looked back at her in panic; they knew that the Black Knight was dead and that she had come for revenge. The guards led the prisoners out of the castle and locked all but one of them into the twenty pillories that stood along the nearby creek, ten on one side, ten on the other.

Elizabeth took out her own, ornate dagger and walked up to the only prisoner who was standing freely. She cut the ropes around his wrists and handed him the dagger. Elizabeth pointed toward the stocks. This prisoner, who had inflicted the lethal wound on her husband, now fell to his knees and begged her not to choose him. Elizabeth's verdict was clear – he was to cut his companions' throats to pay for the Black Knight's death.

He attempted to cut his own wrist instead but Elizabeth stopped him. The killer of the Black Knight then carried out the grisly task, slitting the throats of all his fellow prisoners one by one, finally taking his own life with a quick, deep cut. The guards threw his blood-soaked body into the creek and the water under the bridge was painted red in seconds. The people cheered but Elizabeth no longer heard their voices. She bent down as if something was pulling her toward the creek. Again I saw her as a little girl who was watching the pulsing wound of a soldier in fascination. You understand, mistress, don't you? She was watching the blood-stained waves with the greed of a connoisseur of the finest wine.

When it was clear Darvulia would not continue without an answer to her question, Anna replied, "I see. But we do have a chance against the Turks?"

"Yes, mistress."

“And are there more who will fight like this Black Knight did?”

“I don’t know, mistress.”

“And my Elizabeth! What a girl, to avenge her husband’s death like that!” Anna stared at the flames in the fireplace with a proud smile. “Go on!” she commanded, as if she wished the vision would never end.

Since her husband’s death, Elizabeth had been governing her estates as the head of the family. While discussing taxes with her stewards at Csejte Castle, a loud knocking interrupted the meeting. A guard entered and reported in a choking voice: “Mistress, we found Margaret and Sarah half dead on the road. It might have been highwaymen or Turks.”

“Take me to them!” Elizabeth commanded, waving to me to follow, and we left the meeting.

Sarah and Margaret were lying unconscious in the maids’ room. Elizabeth sat down on the edge of Sarah’s bed and stroked her scorching hot forehead.

“Where did you find them?”

“In the valley,” the soldier answered. “They were lying by the road, with their clothes torn off in the freezing cold. It’s a miracle we noticed them since they were almost completely covered with snow.”

“Go and find whoever did this to them! I don’t care if they’re Turkish or Hungarian but bring them to my court by tomorrow!” she said, and the guard left to obey orders.

As you know, Csejte is a relatively peaceful place, making this cruel attack so shocking. The doctors were all serving in castles close to the war zones, none of them were there with us in the mountains so we prepared the tools for bloodletting ourselves, brought in the linen and began to ease their pain.

First, we punctured Sarah’s arm and soon the small bowl next to the bed was filled with her blood. Sarah recovered her breath but did not open her eyes. Elizabeth stayed with them the whole evening, brought them fresh water and wiped sweat from their burning brows.

Late at night, at the next bloodletting, we were so overcome by tiredness that we punctured Sarah’s arm too deeply. We couldn’t stop the bleeding and the last piece of linen was soaked through. Elizabeth put her hand on the wound to no avail. The blood spurted into her face and she was overcome by bloodthirst. She licked the hot drops from her lips and her hand slid from Sarah’s arm. She let the blood run free, then closed her eyes and bent closer to her, her lips almost kissing the wound. At the last moment she jerked her head away and started panting. She looked at me and her lust turned to disgust – she pushed away Sarah’s arm and I jumped in to close the wound.

I burned some incense and the scent slowly calmed Elizabeth. As soon as she could control herself again, she ran to get some thickly woven bandages. But in spite of all our efforts, on the third day, Sarah and Margaret both left this world. Elizabeth was inconsolable. She left her stewards to deal with the taxes and withdrew among the dark curtains of her bedchamber.

A few days later we had a strange visitor, Count Palatine Georg Thurzó. He entered the castle with a huge entourage and asked for an audience with Elizabeth. When this wasn’t granted immediately, he demanded it, although he would not disclose why.

Elizabeth took me, two other dragon sisters and the visitors to the throne room. The Count Palatine arrived with the bishop and a mysterious man, whom we then thought was his personal counsellor. Thurzó did not wait for Elizabeth to give him permission. He stepped up to the throne and stated his business without preamble.

“Countess Elizabeth Báthory, I accuse you of murdering your servants with extreme cruelty and for your own enjoyment. We have numerous witnesses who will testify that you have exsanguinated two young women, Sarah and Margaret, collected their blood and used it for blasphemous witchcraft. The Devil has possessed you but we shall free you from him!”

The dragon sisters and I looked at each other, wondering how the Count Palatine knew about Sarah and Margaret. However, Elizabeth was one step ahead.

“My dear Count Palatine, the whole country knows your plans. You have been craving possession of my lands for years. As soon as my husband died, you immediately set your eyes on my estates and myself, as if I, a Báthory, wasn’t of higher status than you. Answer me, Count Palatine, who attacked Sarah and Margaret? Who tore off their fine clothes? And who threw their unconscious bodies in the snow? You need not answer because we all know who did it.”

“Wonderful Elizabeth, admired by everyone like a queen!” Thurzó sneered and glanced at the bishop, who immediately returned his look. “As I said, I have witnesses. You must admit the horrific crimes you have committed!”

“Pray, who are these witnesses?”

“I don’t know …” the Count Palatine began. He took a few steps toward the throne and pointed at the dragon sisters. “Perhaps these two here,” he said, then walked on. “And this old one at the side,” pointing to me. “Will that be enough, Countess?”

The mysterious man, whom we had thought was the Count Palatine’s councillor, smiled and started measuring us up, wondering where to start his torture first. Perhaps our eyes? No, he would leave our eyes till last. Mistress! Seeing the future is a horrible gift when after being tortured all over, one is blinded. Thurzó had arrived with 40 soldiers, but Elizabeth had

no army in Csejte and we three dragon sisters were not enough to protect her from him.

We were tortured for days. During this time, Elizabeth was locked up in the tower and not even allowed out to hear her so-called verdict passed. My interrogator let me be only when he thought it was no longer worth bothering with an old, blind woman. I was left tied up between the mouldy walls, among the rats until one of the servants eventually set me free.

Upon finishing her story, Darvulia keeled over, as if she had aged years. Anna looked at the young clairvoyant with pity and knew that her words were true.

“Thurzó will be the one who turns against us then?”

“Yes, mistress.”

Then Anna led the conversation back to her daughter. “And how did Elizabeth escape her prison?”

“The Count Palatine had the door of the tower walled up and would have left her, but the king would not let a noblewoman be treated in such a way. She was allowed to move around freely within the confines of Csejte Castle, but although she had been let out of her prison, it was now too late. The sound of the whips she had heard through the narrow windows of her tower and the other cruelties that Thurzó’s soldiers had inflicted on everyone broke her. She had heard the suffering of her people for so long that her inability to help them eventually had driven her mad. It was what killed her,” Darvulia said.

Anna jumped up in horror from her throne and slapped the young dragon sister.

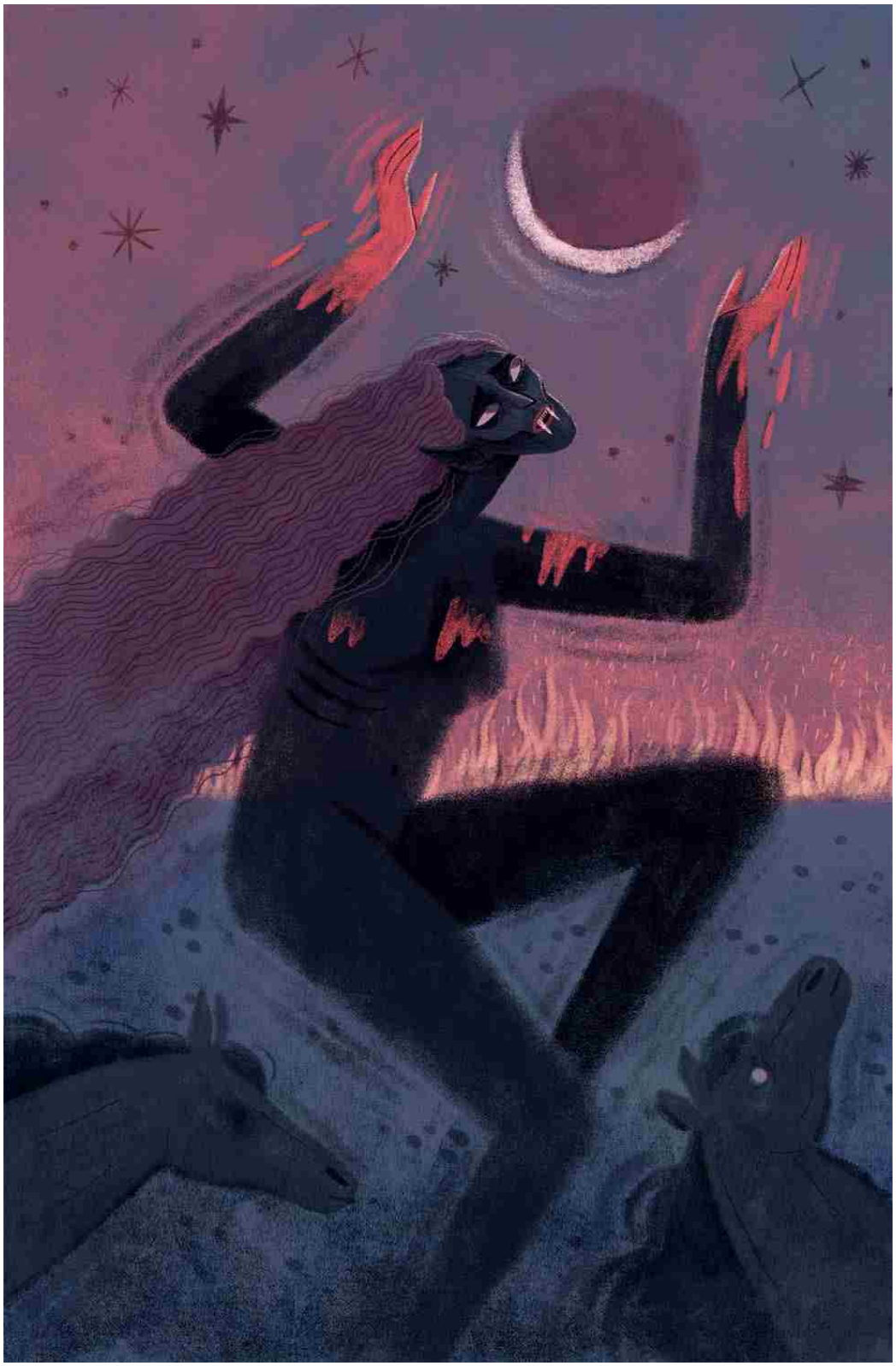
Darvulia fell on the carpet, lips bleeding. “But she would go on to rise from the dead, mistress! She would get her revenge on the Count Palatine!”

Anna’s face softened and she bent down to the young woman. She helped her up, wiping blood from her lips. “I apologise for my outburst. I was overcome. Please continue. She would rise from the dead. Make sure we get to the revenge part!” She sat back down on her throne, ready to hear the end of Elizabeth’s story.

When the news spread that Elizabeth had died in captivity, Thurzó himself came to Csejte. He had his soldiers smuggle the countess’s body out on a covered cart and headed east, across the mountains. I decided to send a dragon sister after them so, through her magic, I would be able to see and hear everything that happened during the journey. Since I had been blinded, this exhausting magic had become an everyday necessity.

I chose Katarina, who followed Thurzó’s soldiers until the cart turned south and carried its secret cargo to Wallachia. Then, on a remote plain, they stopped and buried Elizabeth. There was no funeral; they simply dug a hole for her as if she were a criminal. And that might have been their goal – to make everybody forget Elizabeth and the whole Báthory family.

However, months later, I had a strange dream. It was cold and dark and I smelled blood seeping toward me. At first, I couldn’t move, as if the thick darkness had turned into mud. I started digging and soon I saw a human arm, then another one and a third, and finally I saw the silver light of the moon and stepped out into the night. I was on the battlefield, where countless dead Turkish soldiers lay as far as I could see. And all that blood! The thirsty soil swallowed it up but still there were pools between the dead soldiers and horses and I couldn’t wake up from the nightmare.



But then I heard Katarina’s voice as she stepped over to my bed. That was when I realized what I was seeing was not a dream. The images had come from someone else’s eyes – Elizabeth’s eyes. She was walking between the pools of blood and I heard only one word echo in her head: *Thur-zó!* The smells became stronger, as if her senses had multiplied. A dying horse lay in front of her, still alive and full of blood. Elizabeth jumped on it, tearing it apart with her teeth as easily and ruthlessly as a dragon!

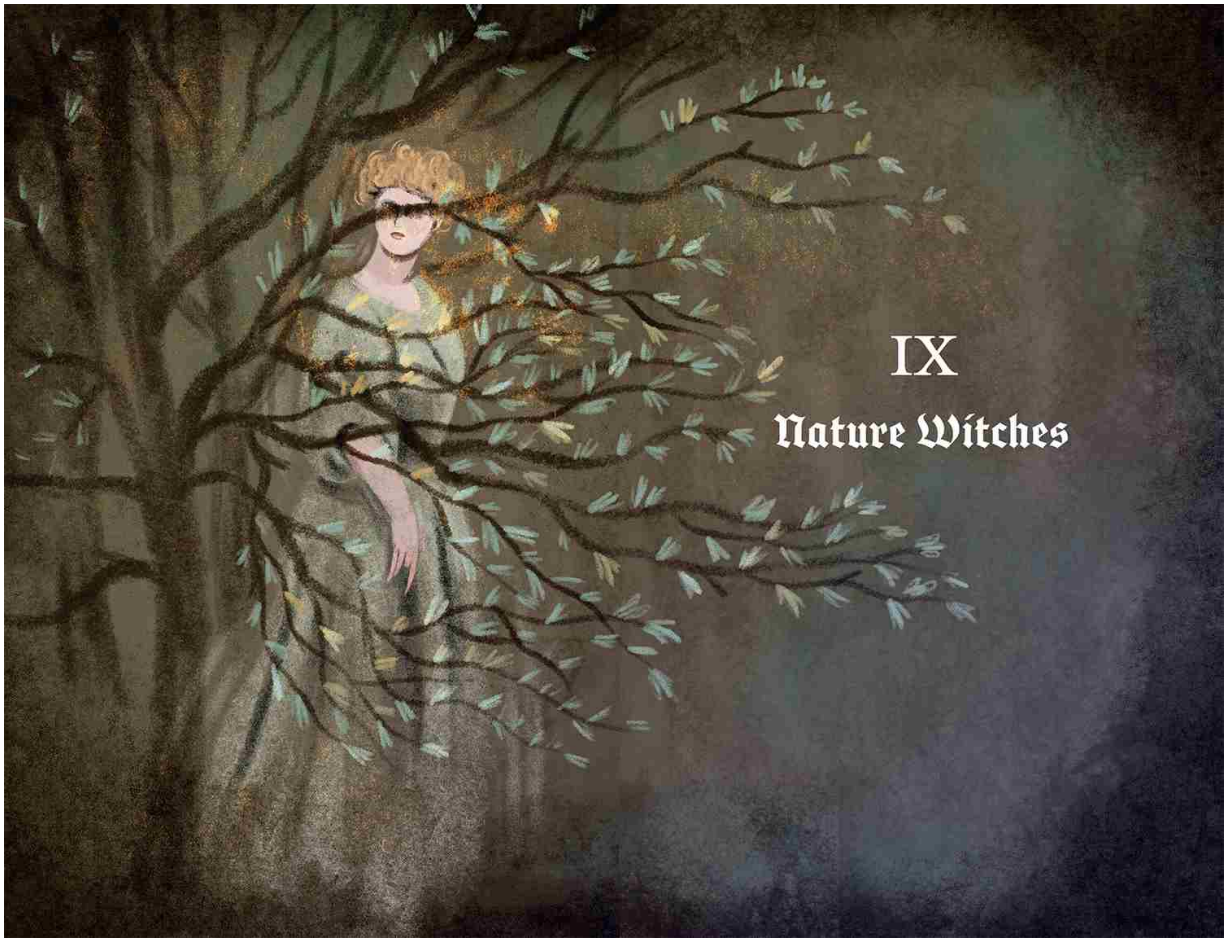
“Yes!” Anna exclaimed in triumph.

“Then she made her way north,” Darvulia continued, “through the mountains to get closer to the Count Palatine. She found him in the Thurzó mansion, where he finally paid for what he had done. She wiped his name from the books and amalgamated his estates with hers. Elizabeth became greater than the king, even greater than the sultan!”

Then the images of the vision were drowned and Darvulia saw nothing other than Anna before her. She could see in her mistress’s eyes that she was imagining herself as her daughter and believing that, through Elizabeth, she would live forever, no matter the price.

At that moment, the full moon broke through the clouds and filled the Knights’ Hall with light. Anna rose from her throne and walked across the ornate carpet. She stepped over the neck of the dragon on the end of Opos’s spear and looked back at Darvulia from the door.

“What are you waiting for? It’s time!”



IX

Nature Witches

ELIZABETH COULD HAVE BECOME ANYONE if her mother had not sealed her fate before she was even born. But, although during her life she was the much-loved mistress of her own lands, the curse of eternal life and Thurzó's cruelty turned her into a vengeful vampire, who only saw hot blood in people and beasts alike.

You, on the other hand, have lots of opportunities. You could become the girl transformed into a mouse by Pierced Gitta if you let others shape your life. But you could also be Rosa, the shapeshifter who finally took her life into her own hands and saved the people of the slums. Or you might become like Breeze, Heather or another of the hunted women in these tales if you drift into the company of people like Sanna and her followers. They all want to take your soul, just like the pale merchant in the Thief of Shadows. But if you are brave enough, you could be like Ayodé, who gave all her strength to help others. There are very few like her in the world and that's the very reason we need more.

The alchemists of Lute Play? You are just as curious as Newton or Alice, otherwise you would not be listening to the forgotten tales of a rambling fool and I wouldn't be going to all the effort of telling you them. And then there is Amelia, who rid the town of Wælmoor of its millennial curse. So who would you choose? Well, I know who I am! I'm Darvulia, who saw the future but nobody listened to her …

I almost forgot – you could also become a nature witch. They are the ones we will investigate next: witches whose task it is to protect nature and all living things within it, be they plants, animals, humans or crystals. Yes, crystals do live, grow and change just like us, though so slowly that we

can’t perceive it happening. My favourites are pebbles on riverbanks, worn down over the centuries because they’ve let the water wash away all that is superfluous, rushing on between them as if they themselves were now part of the river.

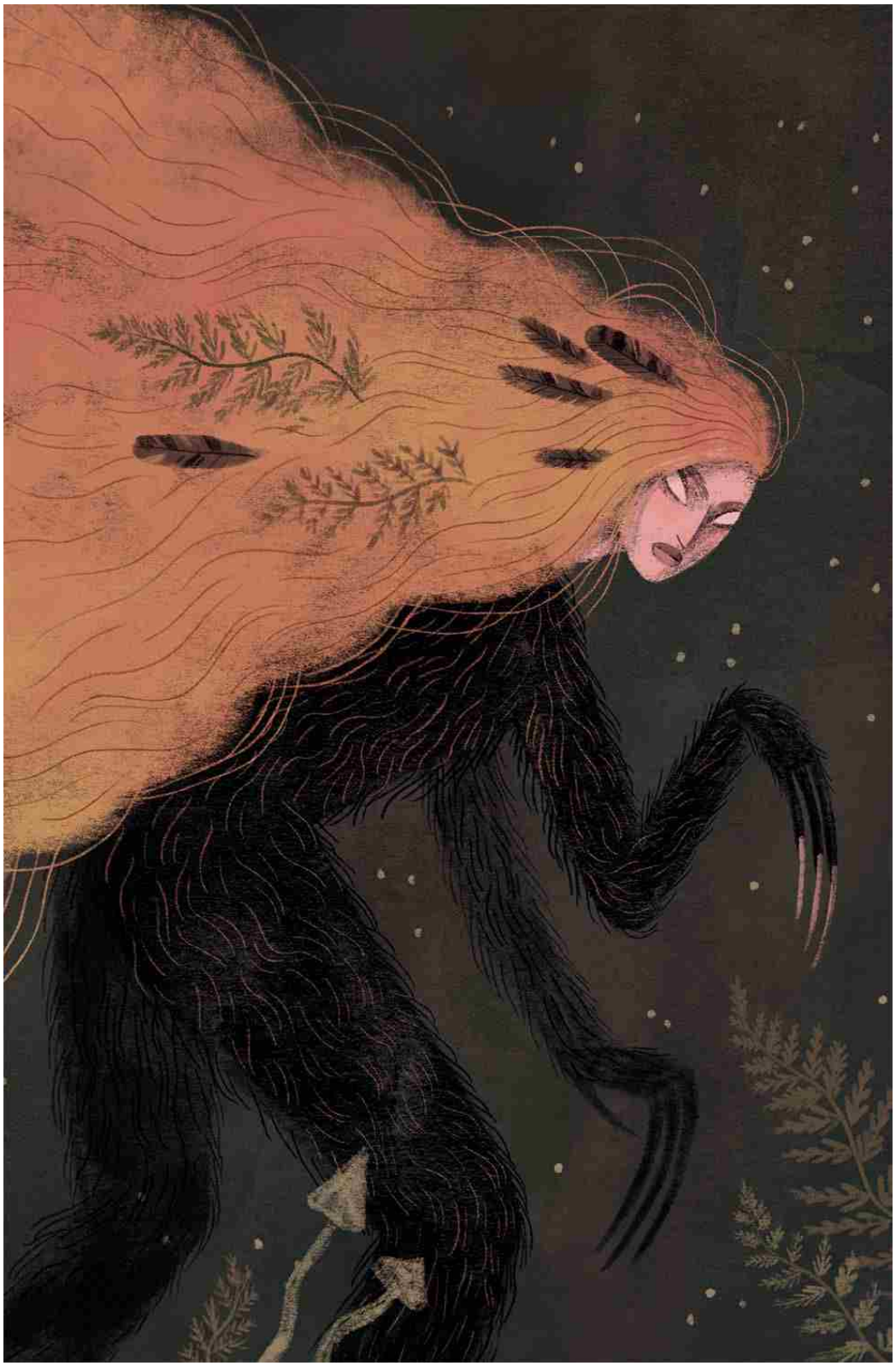
Vadleány

TYPE magical creature

AREA Hungary

POWERS superhuman strength, influencing the weather

TALE You can meet the *vadleány* in the middle of dark forests, in deserted clearings and near secret caves. Her hair reaches to the ground, her face is beautiful and she wears no clothes, but her body is covered with hair and the claws on her hands and feet are long like a bear’s. This might be why bears bring her meat, but she also eats green twigs and wild pears and drinks deer milk and water from the giants’ well. She can foretell the weather, so she cries in the sunshine because she knows it will become cloudy and laughs in the rain because she can see it stopping. When she is angry, she creates a storm that destroys everything and screeches like an owl. She can be tamed temporarily but because she has wild blood, sooner or later she always returns to the wild.



The Lady of the Lake

TYPE enchantress

AREA Great Britain

POWERS magic, healing

TALE Like most characters in the extended Arthur mythology, the Lady of the Lake is also a complex, contradictory personality resulting from the combination of several characters. She appears under the names Nimue, Ninianne or Viviane. She either helps or destroys those who meet her but the encounter always turns a person’s fate. Her most iconic appearance is when she gives Arthur Excalibur, the magic sword forged in Avalon, which brings the king great victories and accompanies him until his death.

She has the opposite effect on Merlin’s life. The wizard falls madly in love with Nimue and keeps harassing her, but she rejects him because she only wants to learn from him. Eventually they make an agreement: in return for magical knowledge, she will give him what he wants. However, the Lady of the Lake is disgusted by and afraid of the persistent old man, so she forms a plan to thwart him. When Merlin has given her all his knowledge, she uses his own magic against him and locks him inside a tree, condemning him to eternal sleep in the depth of an endless forest, where wild animals are the only witnesses to her deed. Merlin, having the power of foresight, knew his fate in advance but could not avoid it. Nimue eventually replaces Merlin as advisor to King Arthur.

Koluskap

TYPE guardian

AREA Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine and Atlantic Canada (Wabanaki Nations)

POWERS maintaining the balance of nature, shaping the landscape

TALE Koluskap is the most powerful heroic figure of the Mi’kmaq, Maliseet, Passamaquoddy, Penobscot and Abenaki First Nations. He is said to be the first human and nobody stronger than him has been born since. He has never got old and never died. He created the mountains and the islands and determined the size of the animals.

Koluskap once warned the beaver, Bever-P’chee Qua-beet, that his dams were causing a lot of problems. But the beaver, who in those times was as enormous as a bear, did not listen to him and blocked another river, which then flooded the surrounding area, covering the burrows of the other animals. Koluskap hit the dam with his club so hard that the water broke through and carried away part of it, which later became the island of Quak-m’kagan’ik. Since then, beavers have never grown as big as they used to be.

Ginny Greenteeth, Nelly Longarms and Peg Powler

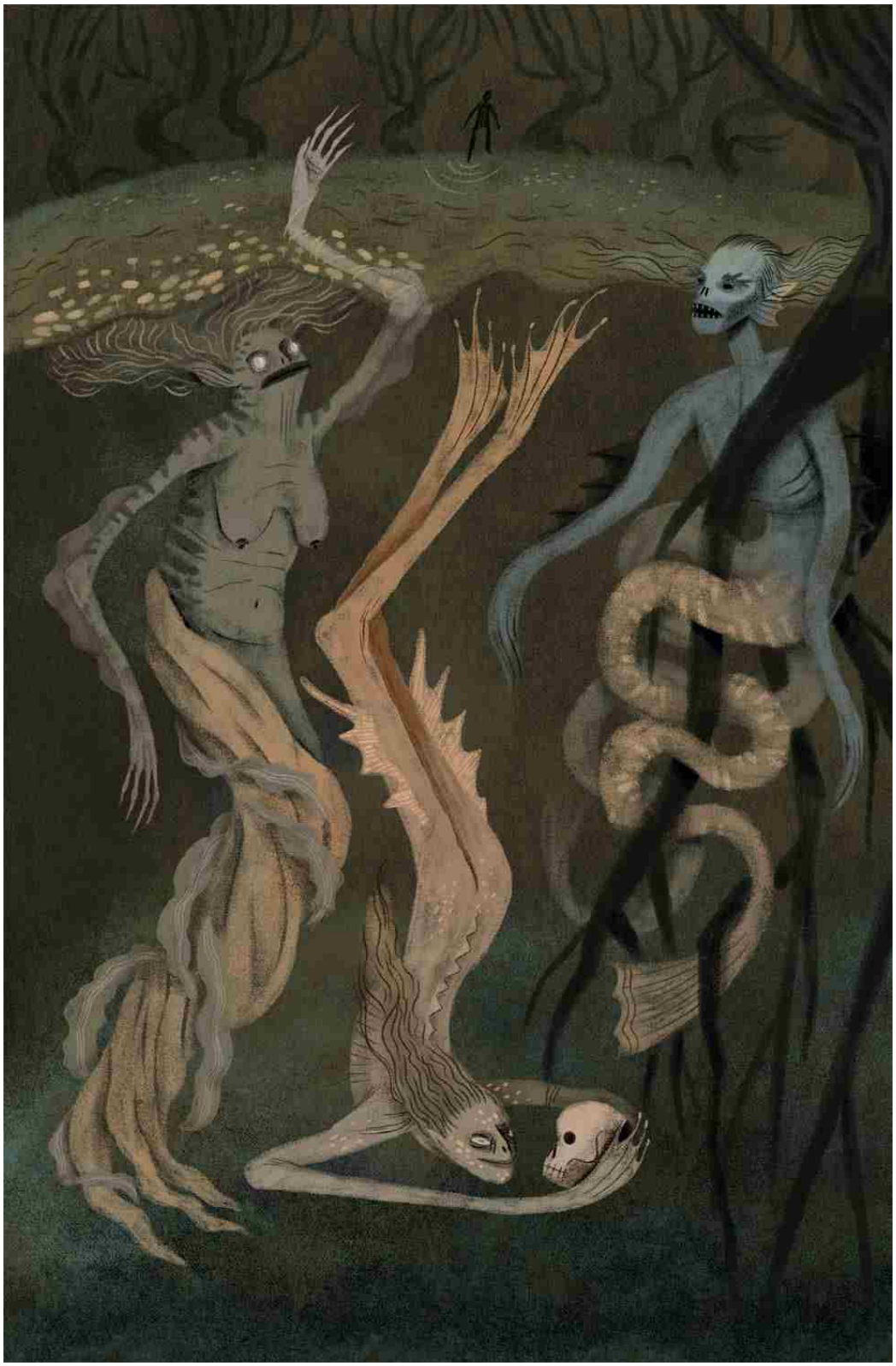
TYPE water hag

AREA Great Britain

POWERS ambushing, amphibian lifestyle

TALE Based solely on their names, Ginny, Nelly and Peg could be average village girls, but in fact they are the ones who hunt for such girls. Should a child go too close to the muddy, turbid water, overgrown with duckweed, while picking water lilies or fishing for small, fast daces and graylings, they have a big chance of having a fatal encounter with a water hag.

Ginny has green skin, sharp teeth and long hair, and she may also attack from the tops of the trees, while Nelly Longarms reaches up for her prey from the bottom of a lake with her elongated, sinewy arms. Green-haired Peg Powler waits for her unsuspecting victims at the bottom of the river.



Mother Ludlam

TYPE witch

AREA Surrey, Great Britain

LIVED 17th century

TALE Mother Ludlam was a kind, sweet-tempered old woman, who always helped the people around her. She was generous and tender-hearted as long as you kept to her terms. However, if you did not, she caused havoc and not even the Devil himself was safe from her. Whenever someone in her village needed something, they only had to stand in front of Mother Ludlam's cave and ask for it loudly. When they got home, the object was there on their doorstep – but the condition was that they must return it within two days.

One day, the Devil in disguise stole Mother Ludlam's potionmaking cauldron. Breathless with fury, the witch started chasing him and the footprints of the fleeing Devil created the sandstone hills around the village. Mother Ludlam eventually put the cauldron in the church at Frensham to keep it safe. To this day you can still view the cooking pot that was so desired by diabolic powers there.

Menyétasszony

TYPE witch

AREA Hungary

POWERS harming livestock, bringing illness and bad luck

TALE If in the darkness of the night, the number of hens decreases or the cows' milk dries up, it must be the fault of the demonic *menyétasszony* or weasel woman. What's more, these witches, who can turn into a weasel, can do crueller things. If they sting an animal it might die, and they can make the child of a pregnant woman weak and sickly. However, smart villagers have discovered how to keep them away. They stick spindles into the ground around the henhouse and order the weasel witch to spin. She is so averse to work that she then decides never to go near that house again.

Kurangaituku

TYPE magical creature, witch

AREA New Zealand

POWERS speed, strength, flying

TALE Kurangaituku, the fearsome bird woman, is walking in her forest among the *kauri* and *kahikatea* trees. She thinks it will be an average day hunting birds, when suddenly she feels a sharp pain – she has been hit by a stray spear. Though her attacker starts running away, it does not take her long, with her strong bird legs, to catch the young man and take him into her cave, locking him away among the pets and treasures she has been collecting. Her new acquisition is placed between a threadbare red feather cloak and a *taiaha* staff with a broken tip. She looks after the boy, giving him fresh bird meat every day (she even lets him have the brain) and he suffers no harm in his cage. So, she cannot understand why he eventually runs away, destroying her home and stealing the most beautiful pieces of her collection. With disappointment and anger in her heart, she starts chasing him again, not knowing he is Hatupatu, who later becomes a Te Arawa hero. The young man lures Kurangaituku to a deserted area full of boiling mud volcanoes and she dies in one of the bottomless, hot mud pools.

Cailleach

TYPE goddess, crone

AREA Ireland, Scotland, Isle of Man

POWERS shaping the landscape, rejuvenation

TALE The Cailleach or old woman, is none other than constantly renewing, eternally cycling nature. According to one of the many legends associated with her figure, she is born old at Samhain then, after drinking from the Well of Youth on the night of the winter solstice, she grows younger by the day. She appears as a young girl at the Beltane festival in May and then gradually ages again over the summer. Others say that she turns to stone at Beltane and only becomes a goddess again at Samhain to rule the darker half of the year. She brings the blood-freezing, devastating winters and winds that penetrate to the bone and the fate of all living things depends on her. It’s no wonder that people make offerings to win the favour of this fearsome, hammer-wielding goddess, who can appear as a blue-skinned, one-eyed, red-toothed giant with grey hair.

But the Cailleach is not only capable of destruction – she has shaped the landscape into what we see today. She created the mountains because she needed stepping stones and the megaliths and boulders fell out of her apron or wicker basket as she flew over the land.

The Storm Hag of Lake Erie

TYPE witch

AREA Lake Erie

POWERS conjuring storms, drowning sailors

TALE The Storm hag of Lake Erie is a witch who lures sailors far from the shores with her irresistible song. Once they see her yellow eyes, moss-green teeth and claws dripping with venom, it’s already too late. The witch conjures up a tempest no ship can endure. Lightning sparks from her fingers, huge waves upset the ship and soon they will lie with her among the dark weeds of the deep. Since the 1700s, many boats have disappeared on Lake Erie and the

people who lived on the shore often whispered about the wrath of the Storm Hag.

Elder Mother

TYPE guardian spirit

AREA England and Scandinavia

POWERS protection against evil forces, healing

TALE In Denmark, some people think that a person who stands under an elder tree on Midsummer’s Eve can see the Elf-King and his army. Others say that if you fall asleep under a blossoming elder tree, you will wake up in Fairyland. However, if you wish to pick fragrant elderflowers, you had better first ask permission from the spirit guarding them. In the olden days she was called a dryad, whereas nowadays she is known as Hyldemoer or Lady Ellhorn. She can even protect the tree she guards from lightning strikes.

In England, farmers traditionally put a cross made of elder wood in the stable to protect their animals from evil forces and elder sticks were carried by people to protect them from rheumatism.

Elderflowers and elderberries are used to make syrup and wine but the unripe, green fruit is poisonous, so we had better wait until Elder Mother gives us permission to harvest them before making delicious elderberry jam.

INSTEAD OF WITHDRAWING from this world, nature witches dedicate themselves to maintaining the eternal cycle of birth, death and rebirth. We have a similar task in the penultimate step of the *rubedo*: to keep the material and spiritual spheres in equilibrium, despite the constant change necessary to make progress. First, we must do this in ourselves but the alchemical step of *multiplication* expects us to do even more. Our goals are no longer just personal ones because our path has now merged with those of others. It is like being part of a collective dream, where our own desires and demons are united with the hopes and fears of others. On this common path, our role is like that of the ninth tarot card, The Hermit, which serves as a guiding light to those still in the *nigredo* phase and helps them to recognize the various illusions they must face along the way.

To give an example, last night I dreamed I was a hare living carefree in an old woman's hut until one day a witch-hunter broke down the door. It's amazing how dreams repeat what once really happened …

The Stone-dweller’s Hare

THE WITCH-HUNTER TIED ERNA TO THE CHAIR and made one last attempt to make her confess.

“How much is your freedom worth, old crow? Your neighbours swear you’re a witch, but if you give me a gold coin, I’ll pretend you aren’t.”

“I would, son, but I don’t have a farthing.”

“You must have something,” the man said and pulled open a drawer. Seeing the empty cupboard, he vented his anger by kicking at the black rooster who pecked at his boot so hard that the bird ended up on the ceiling beam. The cats hissed loudly at him but he silenced them with a move of his hand.

“I don’t want the cats or this rooster. Do you have a hen? If not, I’ll take this small rabbit and … this pot of honey!” The witch-hunter looked into the ceramic pot but, finding it empty, slammed the cobwebbed lid down on the table.

Now it was my turn. He caught me by the ears and lifted me up to his face. I tried to escape his grip but to no avail.

“This ain’t no rabbit!” he snarled. “It’s a hare! Don’t you have any decent livestock?”

He threw me forcefully into the honey pot, so my head hit the bottom with a thump as he closed the lid.

“Please, don’t hurt him!” I heard Erna’s voice say. “What harm has he done to you?”

“It’s yourself you should worry about. Besides, this hare is so small I couldn’t even skin it.”

I shuddered in the darkness. For some time, all I heard were the heavy steps of the witch-hunter around the table as he continued to search the hut.

“I see you really don’t have anything of worth, old hag. What shall I do with you now?” His hard boots tapped impatiently on the floor. “I know – I’ll lock you in this shack until tomorrow. Then, if you still won’t tell me where you’re hiding your gold, I’ll be left with no choice but to take you to the village judge. Your neighbours have already paid for the verdict anyway!” He gave a chilling laugh.

I realised I had heard that laugh before but I couldn’t remember why it was so familiar.

The cats started hissing and the door of the shack creaked. Eventually the witch-hunter turned the key in the lock. Then all I could hear was poor Erna’s sighs. I was sure she would not be able to free herself from the ropes he had bound her with.

A yellow beak pushed off the lid from my trap and the rooster’s red eyes were staring down at me.

“Are you all right?” he asked. “Curl up, I’ll set you free,” he promised, pushing the pot, which fell onto its side and started rolling toward the edge of the table.

I tried to jump out but it was no use – the pot fell off the table and broke into pieces. Thankfully, I escaped unscathed. I shook the shards off my fur and the rooster jumped down next to me.

“Now that you’re free, listen carefully! We must help Erna, and you’re the only one small enough to get through that hole.” He pointed to the window with his beak.

“I am?”

“That’s right! Come on, I’ll take you over,” he said, and laid down his black wing next to me.

I had no choice but to climb onto his back, and with three flaps of his wings we were on the windowsill.

“You must run into the forest and find the toad. He’ll know how to rid us of the witch-hunter. If anyone asks, tell them I sent you!”

He put me down and pushed me through the hole. Before I could realize what was happening, I had fallen down outside the window onto the lettuces.

I crossed the trampled vegetable patch and summoned up the strength to jump over the small creek next to the garden. But as I looked toward the flowering meadow between the creek and the wood, I remembered what the witch-hunter’s laughter had reminded me of: the scream of the sparrowhawk. It had swept over the meadow when Erna found me crouching in the thick green grass. The sparrowhawk had taken my brothers and sisters and was now circling in the sky looking for me. But instead of the hawk’s sharp claws, it was Erna’s crooked fingers that lifted me. She held me to her heart and I had known I was saved.

Now Erna was the one who had been attacked by a predator. I looked back at the deep boot prints across the vegetable patch and knew I had no choice … I had to cross the meadow.

I only slowed down once I reached the edge of the forest and heard the chirping of songbirds from the branches of the trees above me. *How will I find the toad?* I wondered, as I gazed at the green leaves shining in the midday sun and breathed in the scent of summer.

I continued further into the forest until I almost stumbled onto a spiky ball. I examined it curiously and a pair of tiny, black eyes looked back at me from among the spines.

“Oh, I hope I didn’t hurt you!” the ball puffed. “I’m ever so sorry, I’m always in someone’s way! Yesterday a bear stepped on me and she’s been dragging her paw ever since!” The ball scanned the trees around her, perhaps looking for the lame bear to apologize to.

“You’re a hedgehog, aren’t you?” I asked.

“Yes, I am!” she said, straightening herself.

I was overjoyed at having finally met a hedgehog in person! Erna had told me tales about them – creatures who had never broken the law of the forest even when everyone else had forgotten it. Long ago, when the forest was young, the animals lived peacefully side by side. The bear didn’t eat all the honey, the deer didn’t chase other animals away from the creek and the hares never fought over the treats. But the blue eryngo – the bird with the most beautiful voice of all – had suddenly felt the other birds were spoiling his song. With his sharp beak he had chased them away from the forest. His triumphant trills echoed through the woods, confusing the other animals. *If he can do it, why can’t I?* they thought. From then on, bears growled at other bears, deer locked antlers in fights and hares began scrapping with each other to gain ownership of the forest.

Only the hedgehog remained calm and quiet. She had also heard the blue eryngo’s song but to her it sounded just as beautiful as all the others and she couldn’t see the point of all the fighting. However, the Spirit of the Forest was enraged by the disobedience of the animals, who could not abide by her one simple law. *Eat if you are hungry, drink if you are thirsty, but never take more than you need.* She conjured a huge wind, which made the branches of the trees reach out and separate the fighting animals.

The Spirit of the Forest then punished each species in turn. For her greed, the bear was sentenced to winter hibernation and to wake up hungry in her cave every spring. The deer’s antlers never again grew as big as before and he must drop them every year as a reminder that he is not the king of the forest. And the hares? Erna never told me about us, but I’m sure that we had been able to jump over the moon!

The songbirds were encouraged to return to the trees and the Spirit of the Forest sought to punish the eryngo, who had been the first to break the law. She decided to turn the blue bird into a weed, whose blue flowers the

animals could only admire from a distance, as her prickly leaves keep everyone away. Only the hedgehog was left as she was and allowed to keep her marvellous coat of spikes.

The hedgehog waited patiently for me to speak.

“I’m sorry, I’m just fascinated by the forest! I’ve never been here before.”

“Really?” She started sniffing me curiously.

“No, I haven’t. I’ve come from over the meadow on a super important mission.”

“Over the meadow? But that’s the land of the stone-dwellers!”

“Yes but Erna is different from the others. She even saved me from the sparrowhawk! But now she’s in trouble. She’s trapped and I’ve come to ask the toad for help.”

“Why didn’t you say that straight away? A friend of the toad is a friend of *mine*. Come, I’ll help you find him!” We set off through the huge trees into the depths of the forest.

Mossy rocks peeked out from under the forest litter and red toadstools covered the fallen logs. We talked about the stone-dwellers and the hedgehog could hardly believe I had really come from a hut with a thatched roof. I jumped from log to log but found it hard to keep up with the hedgehog, who zigzagged among the leaf-covered stones.

We were going around a thick, moss-covered log when a sleek, bushy-tailed, red animal stepped out of nowhere and snarled at us. His cunning eyes reminded me of the sparrowhawk and this was enough to make me cower behind the hedgehog.

“Well, well, what a tasty treat we have here!” the animal said, licking his mouth.

“Lunchtime is past. We’re not your meal for today,” the hedgehog said and ruffled her spikes. “Let us go on or you’ll find yourself in trouble with the toad!”

“Fine, fine, little toothpick. I’ve eaten already anyway. Tell me, what business do you have with the lord of the marsh?”

“This little hare is asking for help. His stone-dweller is in trouble. She is trapped and he wants to set her free.”

“Are you crazy, bunny? Why do you want to save a stone-dweller?”

“She’s a very kind stone-dweller with three cats and a black rooster!” I responded.

“Black rooster?” the fox asked and pricked up his ears. “That old bird is always tricking me! He always notices when I’m lurking under fences and sends the village dogs after me! But life would be very boring without him,” he added with a mischievous smile. “If the black rooster needs help, then this is no joke! Toothpick, lead your friend to the Lightning-struck Oak and I’ll go ahead and summon a meeting,” he said and disappeared in a flash behind one of the trees.

“Toothpick, huh?” the hedgehog puffed. “Oh well. Let’s head for the Lightning-struck Oak. First, though, we must cross the Torrent. Can you hear it roaring?” she asked. As I listened, I heard the turbulent creek breaking the silence of the forest. “We need to get further upstream where it’s calmer. It flows so fast here and we can’t get across.”

The slope ahead of us grew steeper. We stopped for a moment to catch our breath and suddenly three yellow finches landed next to us.

“Heading toward the oak, mud-trotters?” one asked.

“Good that we were passing by!” the other said. “We know a shortcut. Let us help, come on!”

They flew away, one after the other; we followed them, hoping they would show us an easier path. We heard the sound of the water getting closer and soon we caught sight of the fast-flowing Torrent.

“Where did you bring us, finches?” the hedgehog shouted. “We can’t fly!” But the birds flew on further and disappeared behind a rock.

When we finally caught up with them, they were waiting for us across the stream, next to a tree that had fallen right across the water. The hedgehog walked happily across the tree bridge but the roaring stream made me nervous. The Torrent was much wilder than the little creek next to Erna’s garden.

“Go ahead, bunny, you can do it!” one of the birds called.

“You’ve already crossed the meadow!” the hedgehog encouraged me. “You’re almost there, just a few hops along a mossy log!”

I breathed deeply, lay down on the log and started crawling, belly down, toward the other side. The deafening roar of the creek suppressed all other noise and the splashing drops seemed intent on carrying me away. When I was about halfway, my foot slipped on the wet moss. Terrified, I grabbed the crumbling bark of the old tree, but my back legs could not find a grip. I felt dizzy at the sight of the sharp rocks looming below, and I was sure I would fall into the whirling waters, when finally I managed to catch hold of a knot on the trunk. I edged slowly toward the hedgehog until finally I’d made it! Accompanied by the happy cheering of the finches, I shook cold water from my fur and lay down on the ground.

“Nice job, bunny!” the hedgehog said, sniffing the air. “Can you smell the oak? We must be close. Come on!”

Our rest was quickly over, and we continued climbing the hill among spotted toadstools. Around us, the wood became denser and we soon saw

the Lightning-struck Oak. Its burned trunk was as wide as Erna's hut and its sooty inside emanated a strange warmth. Many animals had already gathered around the storm-struck giant. A bear was sitting on the ground licking the sole of her foot, an owl was watching a boar who looked for acorns under the bushes and a deer was trying to shake off the bats hanging from his antlers. The fox we met before was waiting for us on a flat rock but I couldn't see the toad anywhere.

"Why did you call us here?" the bear snapped. "I was in the middle of my afternoon nap."

"We've received an important message," said the fox. "We may be in grave danger! Tell them, bunny, why you've come to us."

"A witch-hunter has captured the black rooster, three cats and Erna," I began. The animals drew back in surprise at the mention of a stone-dweller.

"You don't mean that you've come to get our help because a stone-dweller has attacked another? That is an everyday event among them!" the deer said. "Besides, we don't think highly of domestic animals, do we?" He looked at the boar, who smirked and spat out the half-eaten acorn.

"What do you have against smooth-skinned pigs?" the hedgehog countered. "I wouldn't dare to live in the forest myself if I didn't have spikes."

"Believe me," the fox argued, "if that witch-hunter has captured the black rooster, we're not safe either!"

"But why should we help a stone-dweller?" the deer asked. "I'd say, as long as this hunter only hunts witches, it is none of our business."

The bear nodded and continued to lick her aching paw as the finches flew up. One landed on the fox's head, the other between my ears and the third one, after some hesitation, perched on a toadstool next to the hedgehog and started chirping loudly.

"It's not just witches he wants!" The finch stood tall and started to talk to the other animals about what had happened.

“We were sunbathing on the church spire when we noticed the witch-hunter lurking around. The old women had just come out of the church, gossiping after the mass and soon they started talking about Erna. They couldn’t understand how her garden could be so beautiful when nothing grew in theirs.

‘She must be a witch, that’s what she is, she’s probably cursed our land!’ they muttered as they set off home.

The witch-hunter needed no more – he visited them one by one and promised to get rid of Erna. They each gave him one gold coin in payment. Then he walked to the judge’s house but didn’t notice that his shadow was creeping closer to him. The shadow grew until finally the Devil himself came out of it!

The hunter continued on his way, unaware of who was behind him. He must have thought that the sweet words whispered into his ears were his own thoughts. The Devil rubbed his hands and cackled to himself. By the time the witch-hunter reached the door, he also had an evil smile on his face and entered the judge’s house without knocking.

‘Good day, Honourable Judge!’ he said. ‘I have come in the name of the local women to help you rid yourselves of a great evil! Did you know that there was a witch living in the shack at the edge of your pretty little village?’

The judge couldn’t believe his ears. ‘That’s an honest woman, son, she has the nicest garden of all. The women who’ve sent you should follow her example!’ The witch-hunter banged his fist on the table. ‘We’ll see, sir, at the courthouse tomorrow! The price of calming down the people of the village is twenty gold coins. I don’t have to remind you what happens to those who hide a witch, do I?’

Unwillingly, the judge handed over the money and the witch-hunter went on his way, whistling to himself. Then he went to Erna’s hut. Through

the crack in the window, we saw him tie up the poor woman, demanding a gold coin for her freedom. Isn't that right, bunny?"

As the finch finished their speech, I jumped in to lend my support to what happened. "Yes – and she's still locked in there. We animals are all she has. If we don't do something, she'll be taken to court tomorrow and skinned! Please, help us! The rooster told me to look for the toad, but I can't see him anywhere."

As soon as I said his name, the bushes opened and a huge, golden-backed toad appeared between the leaves. The afternoon sunshine formed a crown on his head and all eyes were fixed on him. The animals around us started whispering, and even the bear stood up out of respect.

The toad's round eyes scanned the group of animals and after everyone had fallen silent, he opened his wide mouth to speak. "This brave bunny has come to us for help, and all you are doing is finding ways to avoid the task," he said and looked at the deer, who cast his eyes down. The toad continued.

"You have all heard the story of the blue eryngo but few of you know that the Lightning-struck Oak also broke the law of the forest. He suffocated the neighbouring trees with his roots, demanding more and more soil. The Spirit of the Forest raised a storm, the likes of which had never been seen before. Though the oak had grown higher than any of his companions, one strike of lightning was enough to end his tyranny.

Eat if you are hungry, drink if you are thirsty, but never take more than you need – the Spirit of the Forest might show tolerance when the rule is broken once but only for a short time. The witch-hunter will get just punishment for his greed. Until then, we can't let him torture our innocent friends. And yes, we might even help a stone-dweller if we can. I might be the only one who remembers that a long time ago, stone-dwellers were also forest-dwellers!"

After the toad was finished, he looked around at the animals. It seemed they had finally understood what they had to do. The toad croaked so loudly that the whole forest echoed. The ground shook beneath our feet and hundreds of other animals came to gather around the oak. The toad jumped up and sat between the deer's antlers and the owl flew with the bats at the head of the huge army. Then we set off toward the land of the stone-dwellers.

Twilight had descended on the stone hut as we approached it. The bear used her immense strength to break down the door and I jumped in to set Erna free but the chair next to the table was empty. A single candle lit up the pantry. The bear began growling behind me and the hedgehog raised her spikes. When we saw a wrinkled face smiling, I was so happy that I jumped around Erna's frayed skirt.

She went to the table and put down the candle. Humming a familiar tune, she sat down next to a plate of bread, took a honey-spoon from her apron pocket and dipped it into the ceramic pot. She dripped honey generously onto the bread. There was no trace of the broken pot anywhere. Erna just smiled and took a large bite of the bread and honey.

"I see you found the toad and brought half the forest with you," the rooster said as he jumped up onto the table. "You must have had an adventurous journey. But it's no big deal for a hare, is it?" he said, winking.

Erna wiped her hands, scanned the animals then turned her gaze to me. "Thank you for bringing help. Without you, these forest-dwellers may never have noticed that I had moved away." The animals, realizing who she was, cringed in shame. "Don't worry," she continued. "Everyone needs a little reminder at times, don't they, finches?"

The three little birds flew onto Erna's shoulders as the animals whispered among themselves, "It's the Spirit of the Forest!"

Erna lifted me up with her crooked fingers, as she had in the meadow, and held me to her heart.

“Remember!” she whispered.

I closed my eyes and forgotten images rose up from deep within my memory. I saw the sparrowhawk take my brothers and sisters and gobble them up. Then he lunged at me; his claws cut into my fur and we flew higher into the clouds. The flapping of his wings slowed, the grip of his claws eased and I was falling, falling toward the green meadow. The last thing I heard was the sparrowhawk’s gloating laughter and then a terrible silence. The next moment, I was with Erna, who hugged me close just as she was doing now.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “The sparrowhawk can no longer hurt you and soon the witch-hunter will get his just deserts.” She stood up and put me down on the ground. The finches flew off and we all began following the birds.

The swarm of yellow eyes passed the houses quietly and it was pitch-dark when we reached the inn. The bear went on ahead but the door wasn’t locked. The witch-hunter sat at a table by himself, counting golden coins spread out in front of him.

“I’m not seeing anyone until tomorrow’s trial!” he said, without taking his eyes off the coins. We moved closer and had completely surrounded him by the time he finally looked up.

“What’s this? Who are you?” he asked, and we would surely have attacked him had Erna not stepped forward.

“Good evening, son. Do you have them all now?”

“How did you escape? It can’t have been –”

“The animals? Yes, it was them. I’m sure you remember this little hare.”

“If you think you can win tomorrow’s trial, you’re wrong! Even the judge knows that I’m the one who’ll decide who receives justice!”

“Justice?” Erna asked and all kindness disappeared from her voice. “What do you know about justice? You don’t even know the law!”

The witch-hunter jumped up from his chair but the bear let out one grunt and sat back down again.

“I have come to you,” Erna continued, “because you keep breaking the law. I have tried to set an example but it’s been no use. All my neighbours have been jealous of my garden, not inspired to look after their own. Then you’ve come here and not only have you taken what is mine, but you have even threatened the judge! And for what? Twenty-two gold coins? All right, I will give you what you desire and also what you deserve. Make it twenty-three!”

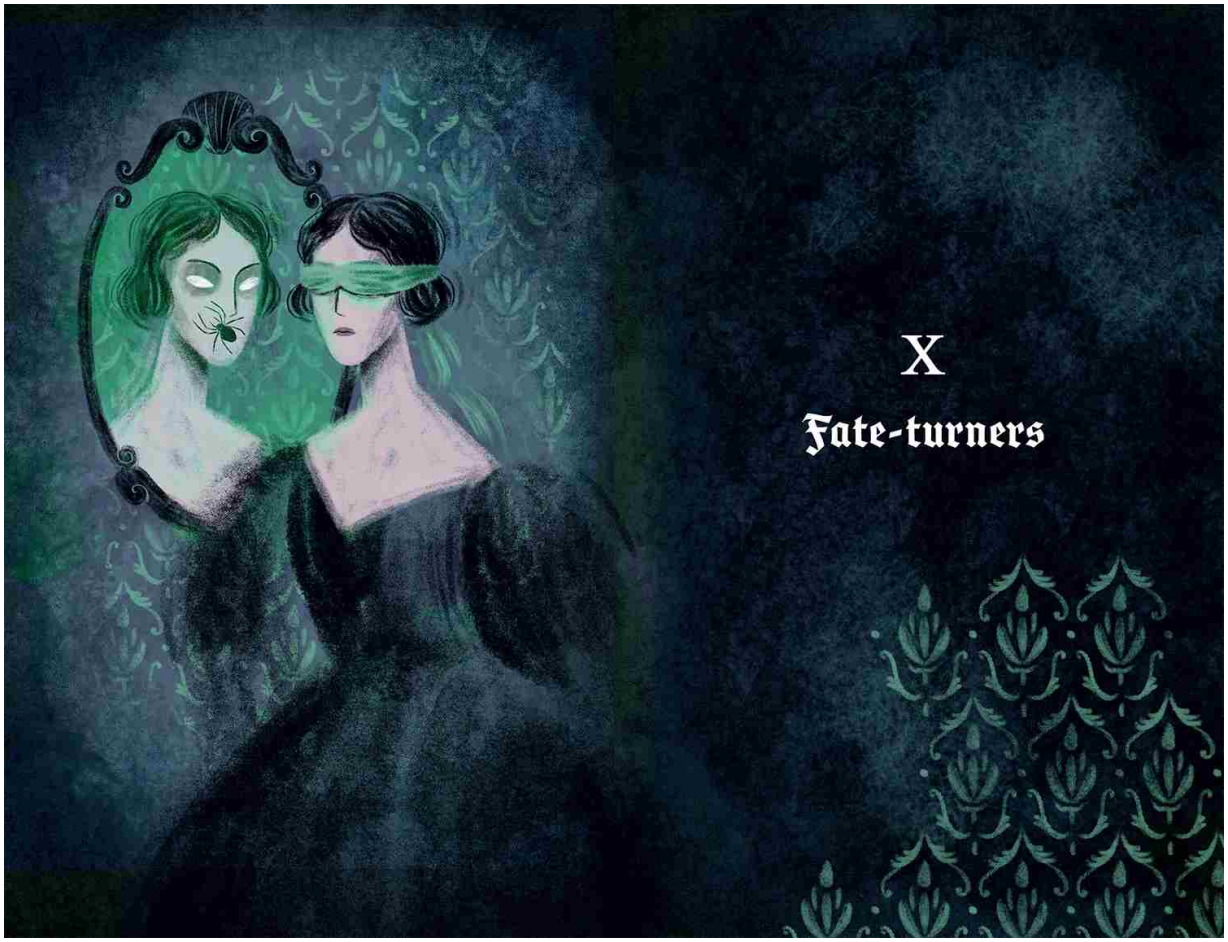
She pointed a crooked finger at him and the witch-hunter started floating up from his chair. He panted in panic as black smoke rose from under his clothes toward the ceiling beams and sooty embers came out of his mouth. Erna drew a circle in the air and with a flash, the witch-hunter disappeared. From the dissolving cloud of smoke, a gold coin fell onto the table. Its metallic ‘cling’ echoed in the room.

“You will now pass from one hand to another. You will see the market, the brothel and the church collection box, before ending up covering an eyelid in a coffin or a gold tooth in a greedy stone-dweller’s mouth,” she decreed.

We left the inn and set off back toward the forest. We were already at the edge before I realized that Erna was no longer with us. I looked back at the candlelight gleaming in the window of her hut and longed to return there but the rooster stopped me.

“Bunny, your home is the meadow. You have now learned everything you needed to. Go and reclaim what’s yours. Erna still has a lot to do among the stone-dwellers but you can be sure that she’ll always keep an eye on you and the other animals.”

I gazed sadly at the hut shining in the moonlight where I had so many fond memories but he was right. Spending the day with the forest-dwellers made me want to discover my true home. Excitedly, I ran toward the meadow covered with blue eryngos, eager to meet my own kind – and find out if we had ever been able to jump over the moon.



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Fate-turners

YOU HAVE NOW MET MANY of the most important practitioners of witchcraft – if I still had a heart, I would say I am proud of you. But do not become overconfident, for the last chapter is still to come! Before I let you back into the night, we cannot avoid speaking of the goddess, too. Yes, soon we will discuss Hecate, whose one face looks toward the past, second watches over the present and whose third gazes into the future. But let us start at the beginning, with Time.

Cronus was sitting careworn on his blood-soaked throne and threw the last bit of the infant into his mouth. In his mind, Gaea's prophecy haunted him: his own children would be his downfall. He had therefore torn away all the newborn babies from his wife Rhea's breast and eaten them to avoid his fate. This is how Cronus became the ruler of life, death and all-consuming Time, until Zeus, his youngest son, was born. His mother managed to hide him from his father's bloodthirsty iron teeth and so Gaea's prophecy was fulfilled – the tyrant was indeed overthrown by his own son.

However, with time, Zeus became just as much of a tyrant as his father and the cycle started anew. Are we also doomed to repeat our mistakes forever? We certainly are, as long as we are defined by the guilt we feel over the past and our worries for the future, rather than living in the eternal present moment.

Let's see what we can learn from the fate-turners who feature in the tenth and final chapter!

Völvas

TYPE witch, shaman

AREA Scandinavia, Central Europe (Germanic people)

POWERS telling the future, sorcery

TALE Women who held magic powers were not always outcasts from society. In Viking communities they held important and much-respected positions, not only in spiritual roles such as seers or shamans, but also as ambassadors, army leaders or counsellors. These witches were familiar with ancient mysteries and used wands and magic sounds in a rite called seiðr, sometimes aided by hallucinogens and aphrodisiacs. These allowed them to move between this world and the otherworld, so that they could convey prophecies or influence events. Almost all *völvas* were women and often they travelled from village to village to help people.

Drabardi

TYPE fortune-teller

AREA Europe

POWERS cartomancy, scrying, palmistry, tasseography

TALE The Roma people were wandering nomads for many centuries, skilled in many special and useful trades. They were goldsmiths, tinkers, musicians, blacksmiths, entertainers with dancing bears, cowbell-makers and traders, among many other professions. Many women practised fortune-telling or cartomancy and were known as *drabardi*.

The human mind, when deprived of its intuition, always seeks knowledge to get control of the uncertain future, and therefore fortune-tellers have always been extremely popular, even though the Christian Church frowns upon such magic. Will Jack marry me? Am I in danger from someone lurking in the dark? Will we finally have a child? All these questions can be answered by consulting the tea leaves at the bottom of a cup, the cards or the lines weaving through one’s palm. And who knows? Maybe a person’s belief in a prophecy strengthens it so much that it eventually comes true more often than we think.

Queen Grimhild

TYPE witch

AREA Iceland and Burgundy

POWERS curses, poisons and potions that make people forget

TALE The Icelandic Völsunga saga writes that Queen Grimhild has a daughter called Gudrun, who wants to marry Sigurd, the great warrior, but he is already married to Brünhild. However, this does not deter Grimhild, who gets Sigurd to drink a magic potion that makes him forget he has ever been married, so she can finally make him wed her daughter.

Unaware that the evil fate-turner is the cause of her husband's unfaithfulness, Brünhild swears revenge and eventually dies a tragic death with Sigurd.

The Illuga saga Gríðarfóstra describes Grimhild as a witch who even poisoned her own husband to be able to rule the kingdom by herself and turned her stepdaughter into a troll.

Raven Mocker

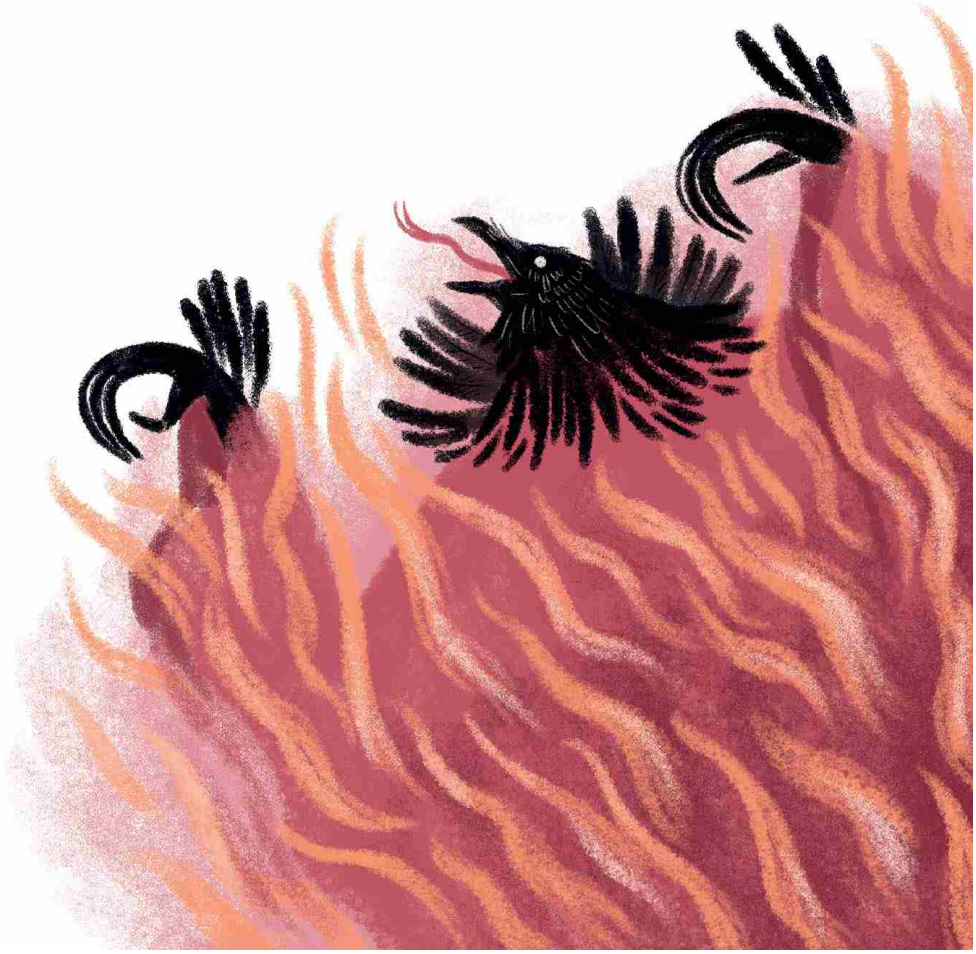
TYPE witch-like being

AREA Southeastern United States (Cherokee people)

POWERS stealing the lives of the sick

TALE Raven Mockers are witch-like beings and harbingers of death in Cherokee folklore. They appear as withered old men or women but at night they turn into a ball of fire and search for a house where someone is sick. Only seasoned healers can see them; others notice nothing but the cry of ravens, which signals the inevitable death of the person who is ill. Raven Mockers steal the heart of their victim

and eat it, robbing them of the rest of their life and adding their lost years on to their own. They are only afraid of healers who can recognize them, because when they do, the Raven Mockers die within seven days.



Merlin

TYPE prophet, wizard

AREA Britain

POWERS wisdom

TALE Merlin was originally a wild man of the woods with prophetic abilities. In early legends he is also known as Myrddin or Ambrosius, and later the prophet of the Holy Grail in Arthurian legend. As counsel to King Uther Pendragon, he suggests founding the Order of the Knights of the Round Table in Camelot, which leads to many a heroic deed and much suffering. The fates of Lancelot, Gawain, Parsifal and Galahad are inextricably intertwined with that of Merlin, but nobody's destiny is more connected to him than Arthur's.

Merlin's prophecy says that whoever is able to draw the magic sword from the stone will be Uther Pendragon's successor. Arthur completes the trial at a very young age and rules the country for many years. Later Merlin warns Arthur that the birth of a boy will bring doom on the kingdom, and his prophecy is fulfilled when Mordred, the illegitimate son of the king and Morgan le Fay, grows up to be an arrogant and power-hungry young man who claims his father's throne. Ultimately, they decide to settle their dispute on the battlefield, but neither can defeat the other and both die. Merlin also meets his fate, but even as a ghost he continues to deliver prophecies to those who ask him.

Sheela Na Gig

TYPE witch on the wall

AREA Western and Central Europe

POWERS fertility, warding off evil

CRAFTED 1000–1200

TALE Sheela Na Gig, the female figure exposing her genitals and laughing widely, hides nothing at all, and yet these carvings decorating Romanesque churches are veiled in mystery. So far, nobody has proven their origin and purpose decisively. One would think that an openly depicted female sexual organ could only be connected to Christianity in another universe but one theory suggests that these figures were created in the Middle Ages simply to warn illiterate believers against the sin of lechery. Others claim the very opposite – that Sheela Na Gig is a fertility goddess remaining from pagan times, whose carved figure is still touched by people who want children. A third theory proposes these images are connected to an ancient worldwide practice – women can ward off evil and provide protection against demonic forces by flashing their vagina.

But more important than the past is what Sheela Na Gig teaches us in the present. It is time to recover our rights over our own bodies!

Mother Shipton

TYPE

soothsayer

AREA England, North Yorkshire

LIVED *c.*1488–1561

TALE Ursula Southeil, later called Mother Shipton, was the daughter of a 15-year-old orphan. She was born in a cave near Knaresborough, in North Yorkshire, England. The townspeople believed her mother had been impregnated by the Devil himself because she was hunchbacked and had bulging eyes, which made people avoid her all her life.

As a child, she was once mocked by a group of men because of her looks. Ursula appeared to ignore them but a while later, the ruff of one of the men turned into a toilet seat and another's hat changed into a chamber pot. After this, nobody dared mock her.

At a young age she learned the secrets of herbs and made potions from them, increasingly gaining respect. However, when she married the local carpenter, she was suspected of having seduced him with a magic potion because the locals did not believe that anyone would marry a woman who looked like she did. When her husband died two years later, rumours circulated that she had poisoned him and she was ostracized from the village.

Ursula returned to her cave, but soon people started visiting her again. This is when her power of soothsaying came to light. She foretold that Henry VIII would create the Church of England, and some even say she foresaw the Great Fire of London in 1666. She became such a

legendary figure that even a moth was named after her – because it has hag-like markings on its wings.

Lilith and Eve

TYPE night demon and human

AREA outside the Garden of Eden

POWERS independence

TALE Lilith and Eve, the two major female figures of Jewish mythology, are like fire and water. Lilith was created from the same soil as the first man, Adam. She sees them as equals but Adam believes himself to be superior and wants to dominate his first wife. Lilith will have none of this and leaves the Garden of Eden forever. She is said to be the mother of demons, but for us she is a symbol of independence and liberation from oppressive power. After Lilith goes, Eve emerges from Adam’s rib to be an obedient wife and submissive companion. All goes according to plan until Eve takes a bite of the forbidden fruit and the couple are cast out of the garden.

Lilith stands up for herself and becomes an outcast of the system. Eve remains in it but as a perpetual scapegoat. She suffers a similar fate to her predecessor, trying in vain to conform to a system that sees women as natural sinners. If Lilith and Eve could join forces, we would be one step closer to a more equal world.

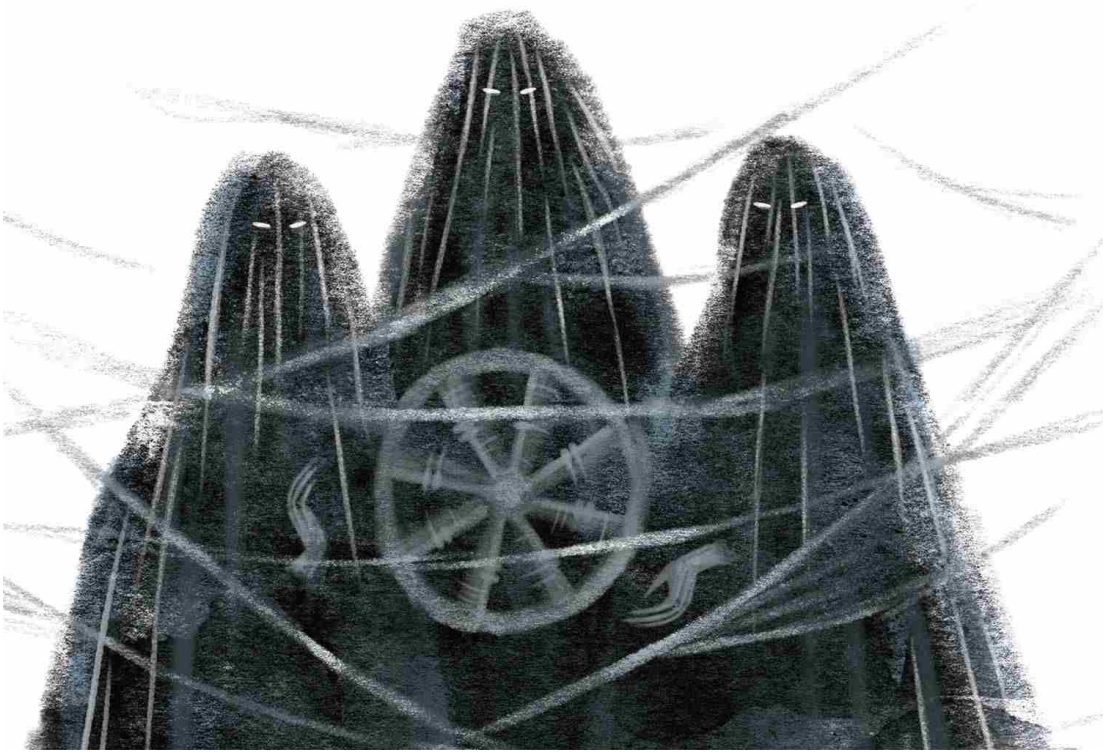
Moirai, Parcae and Norns

TYPE goddesses of destiny

AREA Hellas, the Roman Empire and Scandinavia

POWERS controlled the destinies of gods and humans

TALE Clotho the Spinner, Lachesis the Allotter and Atropos the Inexorable are the three *moirai*, respected and feared in ancient Greece, who measure the thread of life not only for humans but also for the gods. After the Greek era, Europeans imagined Clotho spinning the thread of life with Lachesis measuring its length and Atropos waiting with scissors in her hand to cut the length of a new baby's life. The Romans knew them as the *parcae*, and in Scandinavia, the *norns* fulfilled a similar role: Urðr is Fate, Verðandi is Creation and Skuld is Need. In Norse mythology, the hall of the *norns* is found next to a spring under the roots of Yggdrasil, the World Tree.



Hecate

TYPE goddess

AREA Hellas and Anatolia

POWERS guidance, power over the ghosts of the night

TALE Hecate is the goddess of magic, witchcraft and boundaries in Greek mythology, whose worship probably took over from an earlier goddess in Anatolia. Her statues were placed at crossroads and gates, where various offerings were left to ask for her protection and guidance. She is also depicted as a triple goddess – she holds a torch in one hand, a key in the other and a dagger or a serpent in the third. The torch shows the right way even in the darkest night when all hope seems to be lost. The key might open the gates of Tartarus. As for the serpent and the dagger …

well, along with the dogs who accompany her, they leave no doubt about her unquestionable power over heaven, earth and sea. She is known by many names: Adonaia, Khthonia, Nyssa, Daeira and Brimo. In my last story you can find out why she was called merciful and wrathful at the same time.

Uringye

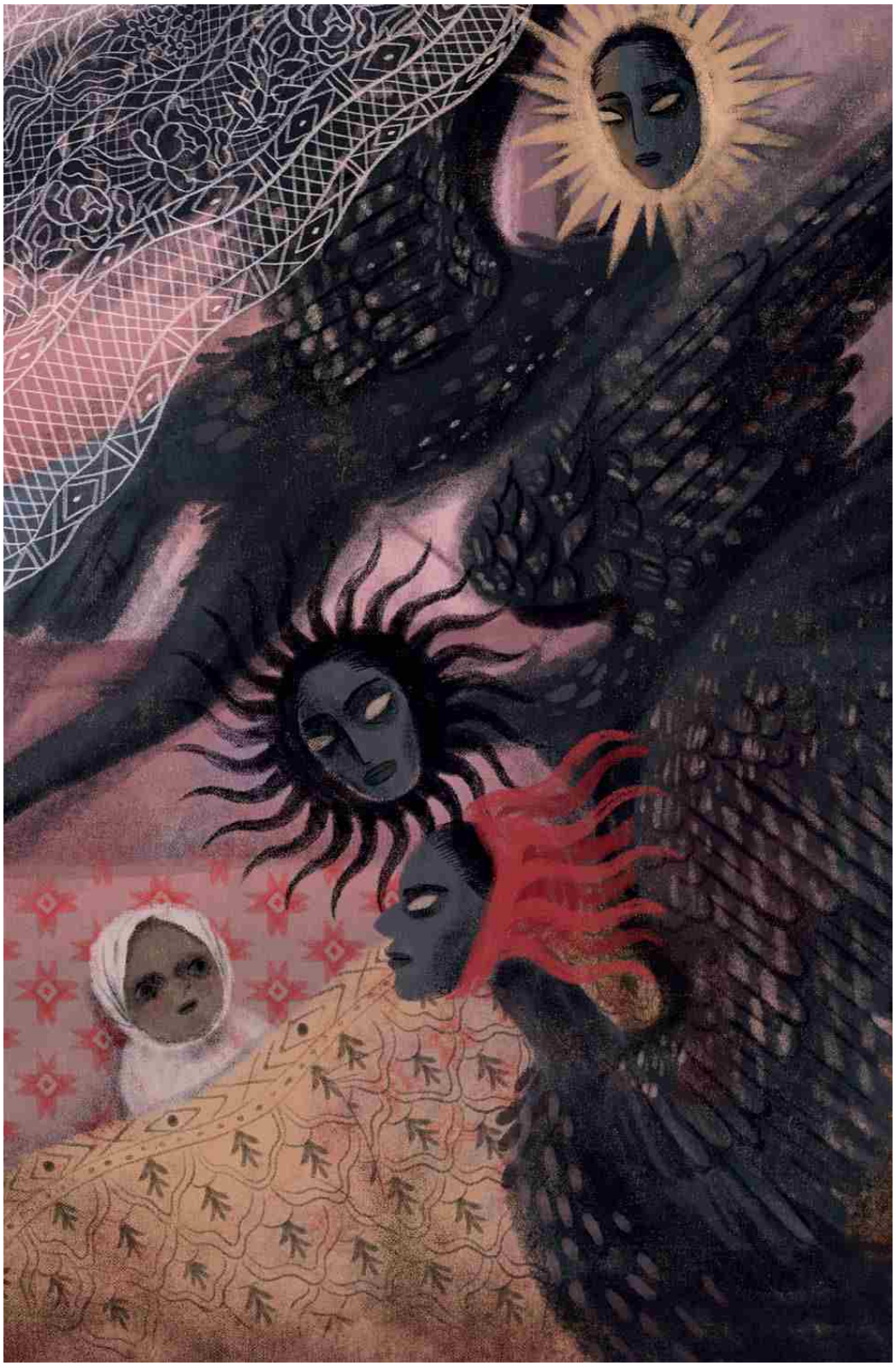
TYPE fate-teller

AREA South-Eastern Europe (Boyash people)

POWERS judging over the fate of the newborn

TALE Hearing the baby's cry, three sisters fly onto the roof of a hut to foretell what future awaits the child and how it will die. If someone looks up at the roof, they will see three raven-bodied women with beautiful faces and barred (finely striped) wings. But almost nobody notices the Uringyes, nor do people hear what judgments they pass over the newborn.

The youngest sister suggests the baby boy should drown in his grandmother's well at the age of seven. The middle one would rather he grows rich and has many children until lightning strikes him or a tree falls on him. However, the eldest takes charge and decides that he will grow up to be handsome but will go blind in his old age and die a natural death. It does not matter if he's attacked by wolves or gets poisoned, he will die the way the eldest Uringye decrees.



CONGRATULATIONS! Together, you and I have now completed the Great Work. We have reached the summit of the mountain and this is the point where we fall silent and simply glow in the light of the stars. The last step of rubedo is projection. When we have absorbed the wondrous sight of Nut's veil, we should not forget to look back at the landscape beneath us where our journey began. It is our faces that will now reflect the rising sun onto the valley, guiding those who still walk the path.

The tenth card of the tarot, The Wheel of Fortune, marks a turning point. We have completed the first half of The Fool's Journey and we should be proud of the challenges we have overcome. But before we can continue, we need to understand the wisdom of the Wheel: what's at the top must descend again before it can reach an even higher summit. Think of it as a spiral. We have completed a full circle but to go further we must repeat the cycle on a higher level.

We have already discovered much about the world. We know that it is veiled by many illusions – the routine of our daily lives, the material sphere and perhaps even time itself. One day we shall look behind Nut's veil too and see what the stars can reveal about the true nature of the world we live in. Until then, let us enjoy the fruits of our arduous work and admire the beauty of the rocks on the mountain slope!

One thing is sure: you must return among the living before you can continue your journey. What awaits you when you leave the hall of the Corpus Corvorum and you find yourself back on Raven Hill? Only Hecate knows the answer. There is no use asking me. I am long gone and this library has been my grave since time immemorial. Should you persevere,

you might be able to hear the goddess’s voice and she will answer your questions. Let the ever-changing candle flames guide you. Make sure you never forget my final tale … And, with that, I bid you farewell.

Crossroads

THE INTERSTELLAR CRUISER continued its journey toward Saturn, leaving Frank and Madelyn behind in their small space shuttle. The cruiser was soon swallowed up in the black void of space they had been calling home since birth. They had started their vacation three weeks earlier to get away from the city of capsules drifting in the middle of nothingness. The exciting programmes on the cruiser almost made them forget how boring their lives had become but now they were sitting in that cramped, two-person shuttle because Madelyn had the crazy idea of visiting another planet instead of Saturn.

Frank regretted letting her convince him to make this detour. After all, they were on vacation and soon the other passengers would be watching the amazing rings of the gas giant from their massage chairs. But no, his wife was more interested in that ruin of a planet, Earth.

Madelyn set their destination on the star map with a smile. *It's a mystery what attracts her so much to that planet,* Frank thought and looked toward the sun, which was still hardly bigger than the other stars. The last time he had traveled into this system was when the miners on Pluto went on strike. Fortunately, the constant whining of the workers was no longer his problem. He'd thought he would finally have time to relax, but then Madelyn decided her new hobby was disaster tourism. She probably wanted to tell her friends back home that she had been to the First Planet and the radiation really was as lethal as they had been taught in childhood. They would be as jealous as hell and Madelyn would feel she had at last got one up on them.

Frank looked toward the Earth. *I wonder what it was like to live there,* he mused and fleetingly regarded the planet as a long-forgotten home. But this feeling quickly passed, like a dream that would never come true. At least they had their own capsule in the drifting city and didn't have to live in the darkness of a mine.

"You're not listening to me again," Madelyn said, interrupting his thoughts. "We agreed that this is my day, that I get to choose where we are going and for once you would pretend to enjoy yourself with me," Madelyn snapped.

"All right, all right," Frank sighed.

"I've been waiting for ten years for you to take me somewhere. Now we are going to land on Earth and see what the radiation has done to that planet."

"I hope you're not planning to visit those ragged barbarians we saw in that sci-fi movie the other day."

"Of course not, you know that nobody can survive there," she answered.

Frank raised his eyebrow. Once again, his wife did not understand that he was joking. "So where exactly are we going?" he asked.

"I don't care as long as there's a palace. And a garden! That's very important. Finally, I'll get to see wildflowers, perhaps even a forest. Do you think we'll see a forest?" Madelyn asked excitedly as she selected those choices from the options menu and the shuttle started searching for suitable destinations. "I've read that they planted parks around the palaces full of flowers that they watered with drinking water every day! What a waste! But it must have been beautiful, don't you think?" Madelyn looked down longingly at Earth.

Frank was surprised by this fact; he was sure no such gardens had ever existed. He thought wistfully of the interstellar cruiser, where the pretty waitress would have been serving the third cocktail by now. No liquid

would be wasted on board that vessel – even the water from the bathrooms was considered valuable and recycled.

With a swipe of his hand the star map disappeared and he had a better view of Earth. He was reminded again of the Pluto affair and the huge commission fee he had received for smashing the strike by deporting the rebel miners' leader to Earth. What was his name again? Didn't matter. The guy couldn't have lasted a day without protective clothing. It served him right for leading the revolt. Better living conditions, a minimum wage, double water portions … Who did they think they were? They should have been happy to simply have work. Production had soared after Frank got rid of the leader of the rebellion, and he looked gratefully at the planet that now filled the whole screen.

Frank tried again to remember the name of the miners' leader but then stopped himself. Why was he even thinking about that? Fortunately, the shuttle started its descent toward Earth, finally diverting Frank's thoughts. He sank deep into his seat as the planet pulled them more and more strongly toward the surface and did not even notice that Madelyn had already attached her helmet to her spacesuit. Frank, on the other hand, did not feel like getting out of the chair; he would have preferred not to get out of the shuttle at all, which was twice the size of their capsule at home.

"You're being childish," Madelyn told him once they landed. "The sooner you get ready, the sooner it'll be over."

Frank put on his spacesuit, showing little enthusiasm for the trip, then sat back and pushed a button on the armrest. The seat rose in the cabin, turned and floated noiselessly in front of Madelyn.

"You've got to be kidding me," Madelyn started, but Frank tapped the joystick on the armrest with his finger and floated out of the shuttle.

Madelyn followed him on foot into a park in front of a palace, pretending to enjoy the strong sunshine. Frank knew she hated bright light as much as he did but Madelyn seemed so enthusiastic about the park that

he began to believe she even liked it. His wife looked at the forest in the distance with a wide smile, then started searching in her spacesuit pockets. She finally found a small, ball-shaped robot and threw it in the air. The LikeMachine360 hummed softly above them, found the best angle, waited until neither of them was blinking and took some perfect photographs.

The couple set off through the park toward the forest and an important announcement popped up on their helmet screens: *Notification – your spacesuit offers full protection from all potentially dangerous scents*.

Soon, they reached the ivy-covered trees and entered the dense forest. Madelyn was so fascinated by the sight of the huge trees that she did not know where to look. Frank, though he would never have admitted it, was also highly impressed. They went deeper into the forest where, among the mossy trunks, they came across a strange, round-shaped structure. It looked like a huge well and an inscription was carved into its wall.

Madelyn was the first to find the key-shaped symbol denoting the beginning of the text and read out: “Wanderer, rejoice! You have found me, but your journey is just about to begin. Seven circles lead into the depth, through the cave into the light. Welcome to the Tower of Initiation!”

Frank floated above the rim and looked inside at the steps spiraling down seven floors deep. “Why was a tower built under the ground?” he asked.

“Maybe because of the radiation?” Madelyn guessed and started walking down the steps.

“Do you really want to go down there?”

“Of course, darling. I want a selfie with you in the Tower of Initiation. Sounds really cool, doesn’t it?”

Madelyn continued walking, knowing Frank would follow. He pushed a button on his seat, and it floated above the well-like opening before slowly descending.

The LikeMachine360 waited until Madelyn had reached the bottom of the tower, then took some more photos and airbrushed the best ones. She showed the photos to Frank, commenting that she was sure her friends would be green with envy – their husbands never went on holiday with them.

“Have you shared the photos?” she asked the LikeMachine360.

The robot answered eagerly, as if everything was in order: “*No connection with the server, couldn’t upload the pictures.”*

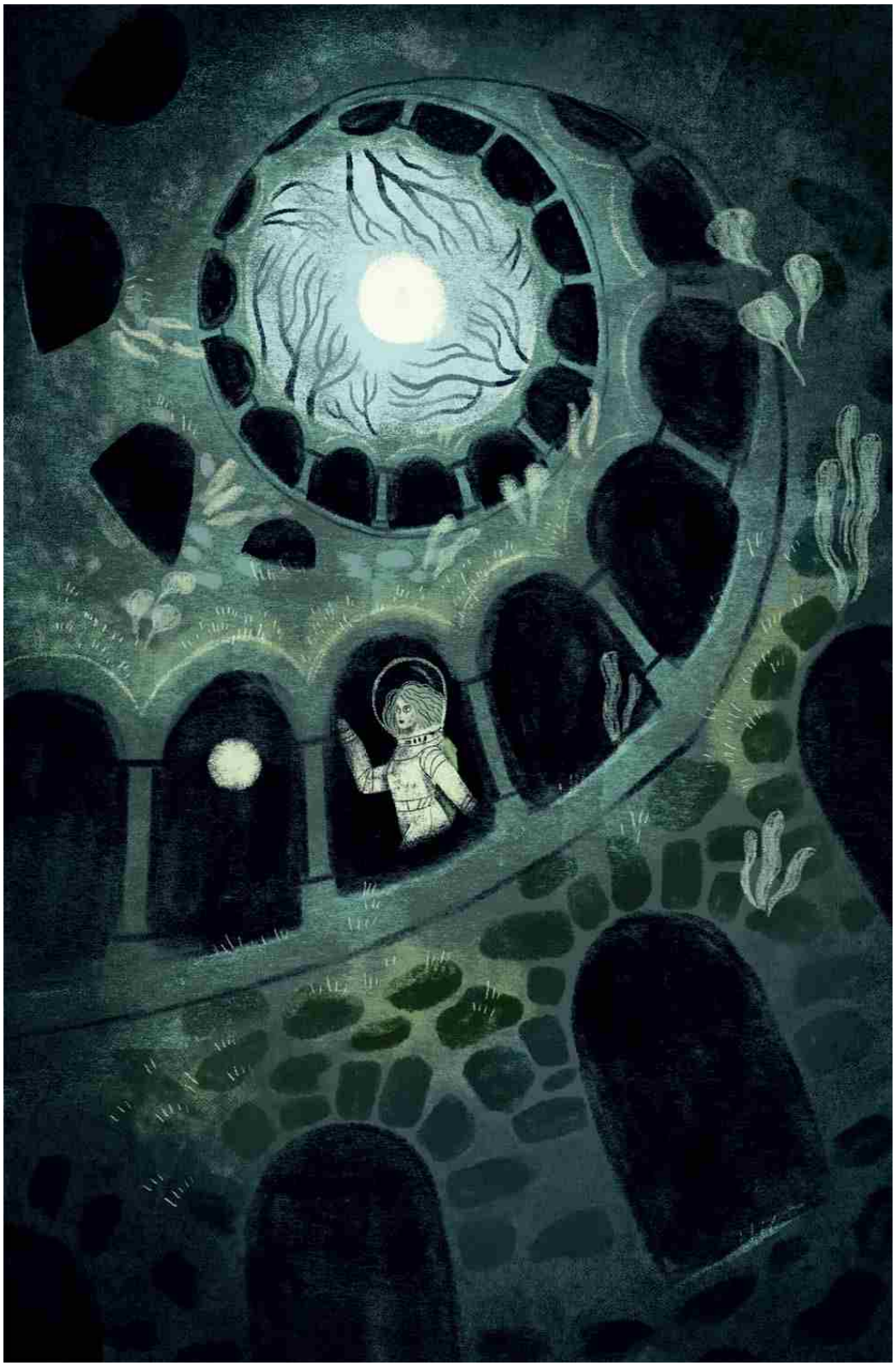
“What? You stupid machine! I don’t believe you – try again!” she said irritably. When she got no answer, she looked at Frank.

“Leave it alone, Maddie! The radiation must be blocking the signal. It’ll send them later,” Frank said dismissively and turned toward the dark passageway opening at the bottom of the tower.

Another sign was engraved over the entrance to a cave. He read it out loud to Madelyn: “Choose wisely and you will find your way to the sun. Stick to your folly and you’ll never escape my pitch-black cave.”

Madelyn shrugged and turned on the lamp on her helmet. “There’s no way I’m going to climb back up all those steps again so soon. Come on, it can’t be far,” she said and entered the cave.

Their eyes slowly got used to the darkness as they journeyed inside. There was just enough room for them to go side by side along the narrow tunnel that led them deeper underground.



Frank heard the cracks first. Soon, they saw a flickering yellowish light, like a reflection of flames from a fire, on the stalactites in the cave. Suspicious, he sent the robot to check what was ahead of them. The LikeMachine360 disappeared around the corner and they cautiously followed.

They saw two torches on either side of the cave. The corridor split into two and at the crossroads a little girl was hopping toward the floating robot. Frank tried to work out if he was imagining things or if he could really see a human being. *Could radiation be that much lower here?* he wondered and ran a quick check. The values were indeed lower than on the surface. Frank looked curiously at the wreath of flowers around the girl's brown hair, which did not fall off despite all her hopping.

"You told me there were no humans living on Earth," he whispered to his wife.

Madelyn tilted her head and looked at the girl's canvas dress and the green ribbon around her waist. "She's charming!"

"You mean primitive. What is she doing here?"

"I have no idea," Madelyn answered and couldn't take her eyes off the girl, who was playing chase with the LikeMachine360 as if it was a toy. But the moment the girl saw them, she stopped chasing the machine and greeted them in a tinkling voice.

"Were you the ones who brought me this wonderful gift?"

"Gift? Who are you and what are you doing here?" Frank asked.

"My name is Nyssa and I guard these crossroads."

"I'm sorry, that's not for you, little girl," Madelyn said. "And you shouldn't touch things that don't belong to you."

"Don't worry, I don't want to take your toy. There are fewer of you coming these days – I've only had one other visitor recently," Nyssa said. "I'm so glad you've found me; the Dance will be so much better with you! All you need to do now is choose which way to go."

“Choose?” Frank asked, and Nyssa pointed at the two corridors behind her.

“You must find your way out of this cave so you can join the Dance. It will be so wonderful, I can hardly wait!”

Nyssa stepped closer to one of the torches and blew out the flame. She winked at Frank and pointed her chin toward the other corridor. He looked back at her and, out of spite, took the darkened corridor. He soon hit a dead end but he could have sworn it had been possible to pass here a minute ago. Shrugging, he turned back into the passageway still lit by the other torch.

They quickly came to a waterfall that covered the exit from the cave; the water fell into a small pond full of white water lilies. They followed the path that took them into a beautiful garden. The green lawn looked perfect and rose bushes were coming into flower. They noticed the twittering of birds – something they had only heard on recordings before. Suddenly, it felt as if they were reliving a long-forgotten memory. They looked at each other and knew without words that they had come home.

So this is what it must’ve been like to live on Earth, thought Frank. He watched Nyssa walking down the path ahead of them, humming a song. Madelyn looked at one flower after the other as they followed the girl. She read out a description of each colourful plant that appeared on the screen of her helmet – wolfsbanes, yellow and purple crocuses, nightshade and a flower with huge, red petals that not even the helmet could identify. Suddenly Frank stopped in front of her.

He stared in amazement at the women and men forming a circle in a glade and dancing to the girl’s song. Nyssa now stood in the middle of the circle, the dancers went round her faster and faster, then she turned on her heel. The wind caught her hair which, for a second, covered her entirely. Then she turned back to them as a young woman. Her long white dress had a belt of ivy at her waist, her ebony-coloured hair fell across her shoulders

onto her breasts and a silver key hung around her neck. Madelyn looked at Frank in confusion but he made out like he understood.

“Androids,” he said knowingly. “She must be a theatre polymorph. They are cheaper than paying a separate person to play each role. I didn’t know they were already used on Earth.” He was more and more surprised at the things they were discovering on this planet they had thought uninhabitable.

“You’re right, we had those playing on the cruiser last night,” Madelyn agreed, but she stared at the figures assembled in the glade, seemingly unconvinced.

The ebony-haired woman ducked under the arms of two dancers, went over to Frank and looked curiously at the man floating in a seat. “Why are you wearing those ridiculous spacesuits? Take them off, the air is good here!”

Frank wanted to answer but Madelyn was faster. “Oh my, look at this!” she said and sent the radiation measurements to Frank’s helmet.

“There’s something wrong here,” he said, looking at the readings. “It’s well known that the air on this planet will be lethal for at least a hundred more years. After all, that miner couldn’t have …” he started to say but then decided it was wiser to keep quiet. He ran a radiation check on his spacesuit but it came up with the same result: the air was perfectly clean.

“Come, join the dancers!” the woman said and grabbed them both gently by the wrist.

Frank jerked his arm away. She moved her hand over the buttons of the spacesuit and the glass visor opened with a click. Frank was terrified and about to close it again, then stopped – the spacesuit would only open if the air was safe. Madelyn opened her own visor and breathed in the fresh air.

“Amazing!” she shouted. “The girls back home are never going to believe this! LikeMachine, take a photo!”

“Stop!” Frank interrupted and the buzzing robot froze in the air. “We are not going to take any photos.” His teeth glittered in the sunshine as he winked at his wife.

“Right you are, darling!” she said, understanding what he meant.

“Just think, nobody else knows the air has miraculously cleared here. We are going to be rich! As soon as we get back home, I will reserve all mining rights for this planet. Those idiots will think I’ve gone crazy!” Frank jumped up from his seat and almost kissed his wife in glee.

“You see what a good idea it was to join me?” Madelyn said, closing her eyes and waiting for the kiss.

Frank hesitated, then sat back in his seat. “Don’t act like you already knew anything about this,” he said as he evaluated the possibilities. *With a little renovation, the palace might be suitable for the headquarters,* he thought, but he would have to go back and investigate. Then he noticed the ebony-haired woman was looking at him with growing impatience.

“Where are we?” he asked, as if he was talking to his own android.

“In my garden. I am Daeira. Who are you?”

“I didn’t ask who you were. Where’s the palace?” He was not used to an android answering back.

“How wilful you are,” the woman said, and her face became as hard as marble. “If you wish, I can lead you to the palace. But everything in its own time. Nyssa helped you find your way out of the cave and now I would like to know how much of the Dance you remember.” Daeira raised her hand to the silver key at her neck.

The garden went quiet, the ring of the dancers opened and the woman waved to them to follow her. The circle closed behind them and the dancers started singing as the ring began moving again.

“Is this a performance you have been programmed to do?” Madelyn asked Daeira.

Frank shook his head, watching his wife try to get information from an android that clearly had not benefited from any maintenance in decades.

“You don’t remember the Dance? I taught it to you,” Daeira said. “But never mind, many have come back like that; you will remember it soon. Look, I’ll show you again!”

Daeira took her hand and Madelyn reached for Frank’s armrest but he was busy watching the figures swirling. Suddenly he noticed a familiar face passing behind Daeira.

“Calder,” Frank whispered. The blood drained from his face.

The dancer disappeared behind Madelyn and he turned after him nervously. Frank had been the one to close the airlock of the shuttle before sending the miner out to what he’d thought was inevitable death. The strike had been stopped; everything had happened as he had planned. And yet, here was Calder dancing among these … people? Apart from the black-haired android, could the others be flesh-and-blood humans? The radiation had cleared and Calder had survived …

Frank felt clouds gathering above, and the warm light started to fade. The singing figures whirled around them with dazzling speed and no matter how much he tried to avert his eyes, he kept seeing Calder.

He wanted to flee, to escape from the crazy android's dance. He grabbed Madelyn's hand, pushed Daeira aside and broke through the ring of the dancers.

Madelyn followed her husband along the path back into the forest. By the time she managed to catch up with him, they could no longer see the garden.

"What's up with you? Are you in such a hurry to get your mining rights? This is my vacation! You know how much I love theatre. I wanted to hear what the android had to tell us about the performance."

"Performance? Those are not …" began Frank, but he could not put into words what he had seen in the garden.

Madelyn huffed and turned to walk off, but there stood Daeira under the lush green trees.

"Careful, if you act like this, you'll wake Brimo. And you don't want to do that!"

"Brimo? Who's that? How many of you are there?" Frank asked, keeping his finger on the joystick.

"The three of us and the dancers. You clearly don't remember anything. Listen, I will tell you the story of the Dance."

"Tell us if you must, but in the meantime, lead us to the palace," Frank said, hoping to get back to the shuttle as soon as possible.

"As you wish," Daeira said and continued along the path with them. She grabbed the silver key around her neck and began the story. "You all used to live here in my garden and didn't know darkness or solitude. You loved the songs I taught you but there were some who decided they didn't want to dance with the others. Their discord angered Brimo, who banished them to the depths of the cave. We hoped it would never happen again but we were wrong. More and more of you refused to hold hands with others. Brimo was forced to punish the troublemakers so often that the cave grew, eventually encompassing entire galaxies."

“She’s telling us about the theatre performance!” Madelyn turned back but Frank was watching the path, hoping to see the palace. The wind blew louder among the trees and Frank felt an icy breeze on his face as they went deeper into the forest.

“Nyssa could not stand Brimo’s cruel sentence,” Daeira continued, “and wanted to give the exiles another chance. She decided to help anyone who was missing the Dance and showed them the way back to my garden. Many chose to re-join us but then something happened that had never been done before…”

“Are you listening?” Madelyn snapped at Frank. “It’s going to end in a tragedy! You never come to the theatre with me, that’s why you can’t follow it.”

Can she really not feel this cold? Frank wondered as he started to shiver. Before he could question her, Madelyn had turned back to Daeira.

“We’ve often heard the sounds of war from the cave. But last time, the rain of fire was followed by the screams of millions, which swept through my garden with such force that even the Dance was interrupted.” Daeira’s fingers turned white around the key, which had started to melt in her grasp, its silver drops dripping onto her dress.

“They acted out the nuclear war! Beautiful! A pity you can’t appreciate it,” Madelyn said snidely.

“We listened to the massacre with tears in our eyes,” Daeira said. “Right after the tragedy, many pilgrims came to Nyssa, but as time passed there was hardly anyone. It was as if people had forgotten about the Dance. Since then, it’s been so rare for anyone to find their way out of the cave. We are delighted to welcome two of you at the same time! I hope you are also looking forward to dancing with us in the garden,” Daeira said and loosened her grip on the silver key.

“How charming! People at home will be delighted when I tell them,” Madelyn said but Frank was becoming impatient.

“Now that your tale is over, I’d like to know how much further it is.” As soon as he asked the question he saw the spires of the palace through the thinning trees of the forest. “Finally! It’s time for us to leave this farce.”

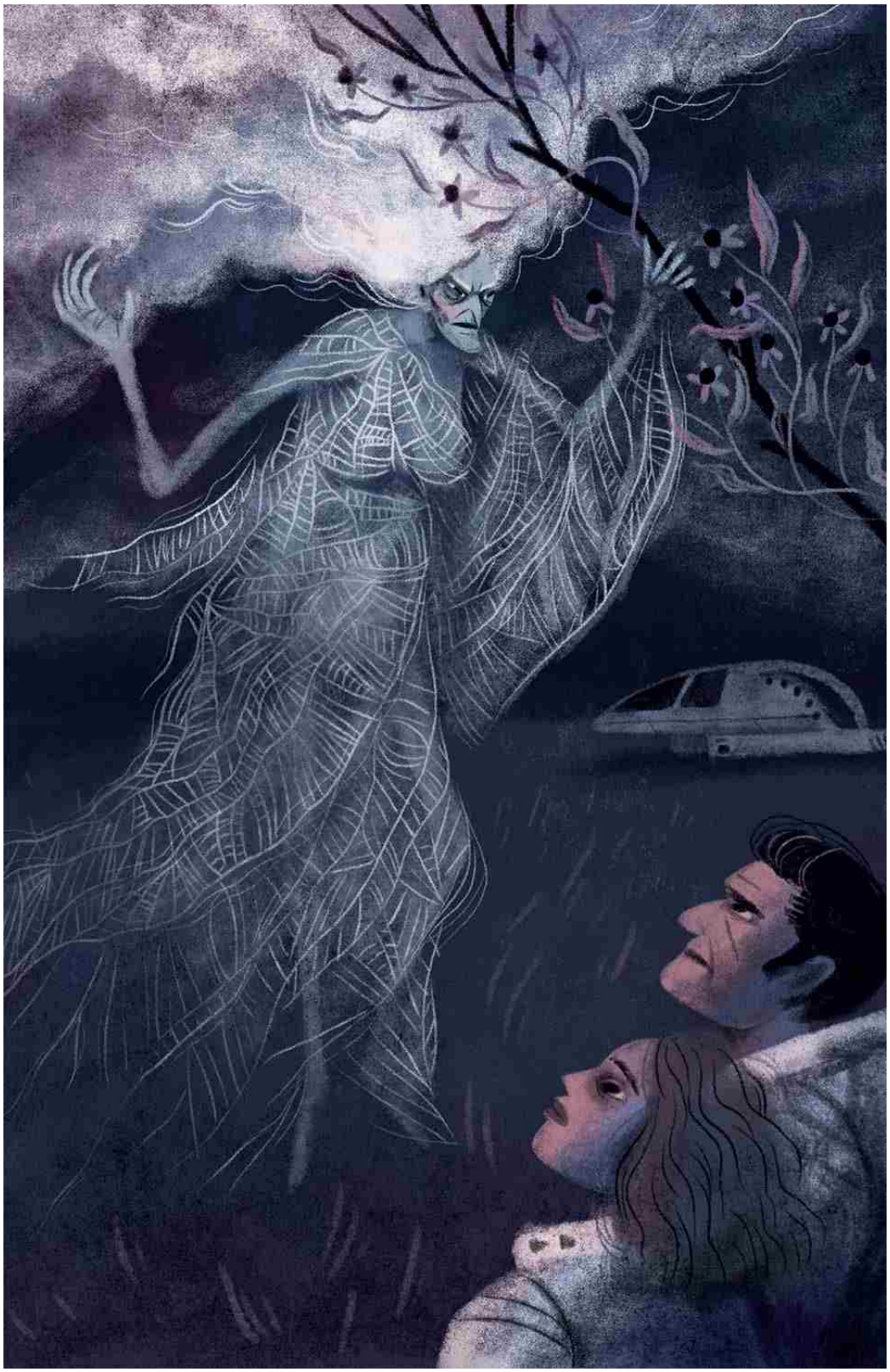
He started toward the palace but Daeira stopped him. “I’ve told you, if you go on like this, you’ll wake Brimo!” she shouted, paralyzing Frank with her icy glare.

Daeira swung round on her heels. Her dark hair instantly turned white, and from beneath the cobweb-like locks, angry green eyes sparkled. Frank and Madelyn recoiled in panic but the terrifying figure turned again. Her white hair changed back to brown and she became a little girl with a wreath on her head.

“Hurry, go while you still can!” Nyssa entreated them, pointing at the path leading back into the forest. “If you join the dancers, she might not send you back into the cave!”

“What is this, some kind of encore?” Frank shouted.

“Oh no! You’re too late, she’s here!” Nyssa covered her mouth and turned on her heels. Daeira’s ebony-coloured hair swished past before turning white on her second spin. The petals of Nyssa’s wreath changed into thistles that fell onto an ancient, shriveled figure.



Dark clouds gathered in the sky and trees swayed in the stormy wind as Brimo's eyes scanned the forest to find the one who was guilty of waking her from a long, deep sleep. Nightshade crept up her crooked stick and the strong smell of violet-coloured flowers filled the air. The old witch took one of the black berries, threw it into her mouth, then flashed her green eyes at the intruders. Madelyn moved closer to Frank and he felt her body tremble with fear.

"So, you are the famous Brimo, self-appointed deliverer of justice who exiles dancers into the cave?" His voice was drowned out by the roaring wind.

"Self-appointed?" Brimo hissed. "You see yourself in me, son. What's the name of the miner you sent to his death?"

Frank looked at her confused, though he knew full well who she meant.

"Of course, you remember," Brimo continued. "Nobody forgets a person they have killed. This is no place for murderers, so what are you doing here?" She sucked out pulp from the nightshade berry and spat the black skin at them.

"How can this android know about Calder?" Madelyn asked so softly that Frank barely heard.

"Nyssa and Daeira are so keen to find new dancers that they are willing to forget all the horrible things you have done. But I remember everything, Frank," Brimo said.

Frank plucked up his courage to shout at the witch. "This is ridiculous! Bravo, you've hacked my suit and fished out Calder's name from the database. A great trick, but I don't care about your initiation or whatever it is!"

"Enough!" Brimo shouted.

Lightning sizzled across the sky above the forest, pouring rain splashed into their faces. Madelyn gripped on to Frank's arm as the witch's voice rang through the trees.

“You will return to the labyrinth of the cave and follow the path that has been set for you!” she roared, raising her stick and hitting it on the ground. The stormy wind swept around them, deafening thunder clapped above, and with a bright flash the witch disappeared.

When they regained their senses, the lawn was covered in dry leaves, ivy had climbed the old trees and their helmets had shut down with a click.

The two of them turned pale seeing the red lights on their helmet monitors and rushed back toward the shuttle in front of the palace. Frank’s seat clicked into place inside and he hurriedly sealed the hatch. The engine roared as it went full throttle, scorching the grass underneath them as the shuttle took off.

They soon left the atmosphere of the Earth but didn’t dare remove their helmets. Madelyn ran a check to see if they had been affected by radiation as Frank stared wordlessly at the star map. The small dot marking their shuttle was moving so slowly toward Saturn that the oceans on the Earth were still visible at the bottom of the screen.

There was no trace of the storm they had left behind and Earth looked as dreamlike as it had a few hours before. They stared longingly at the beautiful planet that had turned out to be uninhabitable, poisonous and hostile after all, even though for a precious short time it had felt like home.

The map started flashing and a familiar girl’s face appeared on the screen. Nyssa’s tinkling voice filled the cabin.

“I’m sorry it’s not your time yet but I hope to see you again. Your fate is to find your way out of the cave and, when you start missing the Dance, I’ll be there to help you. But Brimo has made her decision and as long as you only think of yourselves, you will not be able to find Daeira’s garden.”

Nyssa turned toward the sun, cupped her hands and blew at the star. The flames of the fire giant died out, like the torch inside the cave, and Earth disappeared in the darkness of space.

Frank jumped up in panic. He desperately hit at the buttons of the panel but it was no use – the shuttle's radars could no longer locate Earth. All it showed was the interstellar cruiser, somewhere near where Saturn was supposed to be, as if the whole solar system had been wiped off the star map.

Frank and Madelyn stared at the dark screen in shock. An icon appeared indicating that the connection to the server had been restored. Then the LikeMachine360 took a perfect picture to share with the other cave-dwellers.

Appendices

Tarot and Alchemy

THE FOOL'S JOURNEY OF TAROT

I ***The Fool's Journey*** starts in the sign of ***The Magician***, the gatekeeper of dreams, who pushes us over the threshold into an enchanted reality – whether we like it or not.

II ***The High Priestess*** represents a duality of knowledge and purity. When she looks up from her book, the time has come for a new beginning.

III ***The Empress*** reigns over all that grows. She teaches that if we are guided by our intuition, we will survive the most devastating wildfires.

IV ***The Emperor*** rules all that is tangible. His iron fist is ready for anyone who dares to oppose him. But nothing lasts forever – something is going to disturb this earthly order.

V ***The Pope*** serves as a bridge between the lower and higher realms. It is also within his power to block this passage – but the rays of the sun cannot be veiled for long.

VI ***The Lover*** finally declares their desire for unconditional love. If it is reciprocated by their chosen one, they will shine in each other's light, ready to make sacrifices they have never made before.

VII ***The Chariot*** symbolizes the balance between body and soul. The driver steers his horses with a steady hand, following the guidance of the stars.

VIII ***Justice*** knows that even the Philosophers' Stone has small, intrinsic imperfections and all its faults have their purpose. She reminds us that absolute symmetry is unnatural – perfection is diabolical.

IX ***The Hermit*** illuminates the path we have walked so far, inviting others to join us. His moonlit gaze welcomes all who choose to follow the light of his lantern.

X ***The Wheel of Fortune*** unites the descending and ascending forces, the carnal and the spiritual energies. It is a symbol of eternal renewal – as one cycle comes to an end, a fresh, brighter journey begins.

THE GREAT WORK OF ALCHEMY

Calcination – the first step of *nigredo*. It involves a threatening encounter that also holds the promise of rebirth.

Solution – the revival of the calcined body. Water gives you the vitality to transform into something else, something *more.*

Separation – sorting the wheat from the chaff. "Know thyself" and reject the rest with utmost confidence.

Conjunction – the recombination of separated elements and the emergence of a new substance. Yet the thundering cloud of black crows foreshadows even more tribulations.

Putrefaction & Congelation – a state of decay in undisturbed silence. You might be able to escape from this cold black pit – but only with the help of others.

Cibation & Sublimation – the end of the lesser work and the beginning of *albedo*. It is time to purify your soul, so you can finally see beyond yourself.

Fermentation – the secret work of the winemaker has begun. Let your fertile dreams awaken a higher purpose inside you.

Exaltation – the Philosophers' Stone is ready. You have mastered the changes of body and soul – but beware! If you keep this knowledge to yourself, you will lose everything you have worked for.

Multiplication – the penultimate step of *rubedo.* Look how close you are to the summit! Gather strength from your own transmutation and see what has to be done around you.

Projection – the final step of the Great Work. You have attained clarity, harmony and peace within. Now it is time to turn the world golden!

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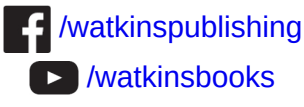
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For many centuries the figure of the witch has haunted our imagination and our nightmares. There have been many attempts to quash our fascination with these wielders of forbidden powers, but all have failed.

We invite you now on a journey through a moonlit world, where every shadow tells a tale of magic, persecution and persistence. In this beautifully illustrated volume, discover witches real and legendary, who once terrorized, devoured, helped or empowered their communities, but who are now largely forgotten.

Ten chapters introduce ten different categories of witches, from curse-bringers, shape-shifters and survivors to revenants, nature witches and fate-turners. Most, but far from all, are women, and their stories come from across the world.

Each chapter is linked to a different card of the Major Arcana and to a stage in the alchemical process of turning base metal to gold. In this way, as you learn about the witches, you will complete a journey of self-discovery and transformation, gleaning wisdom and empowerment from the awe-inspiring magical practitioners of folk tradition and history.

Lilla Bölecz is an artist specializing in book illustration, graphic art, dollmaking and pattern design. Her work is inspired by mysticism, spiritual experiences, folklore and literature.

Balázs Tátrai is a writer of unusual stories, rooted in folklore and branching out into the unexpected. His passion is the study of alchemy and 17th-century iconography.

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Witchcraft

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